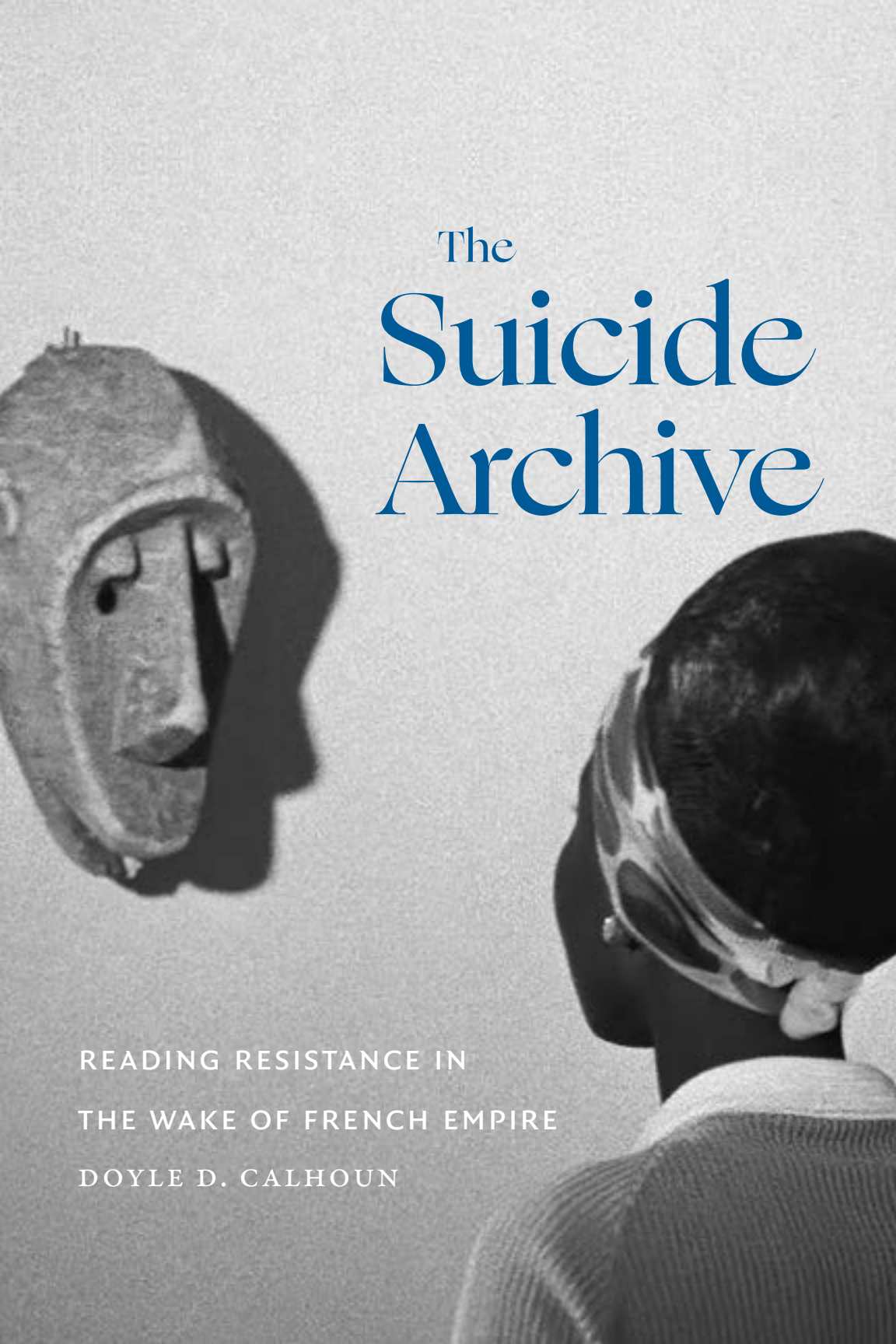
The Suicide Archive



READING RESISTANCE IN THE WAKE OF FRENCH EMPIRE

DOYLE D. CALHOUN

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Duke University Press *Durham and London* 2024

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project Editor: Ihsan Taylor
Designed by Courtney Leigh Richardson
Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro and QuadraatSansPro by
Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Calhoun, Doyle D., [date] author.
Title: The suicide archive : reading resistance in the wake of French empire / Doyle D. Calhoun.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2024. |
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2023057405 (print)
LCCN 2023057406 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478030744 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478026501 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478059738 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Enslaved persons—Suicidal behavior. | Suicide in literature. | Suicide in art. | Slavery—Psychological aspects. | Postcolonialism. | France—Colonies—Administration. | Africa—Colonization—Psychological aspects. | BISAC: SOCIAL SCIENCE / Ethnic Studies / American / African American & Black Studies | POLITICAL SCIENCE / Colonialism & Post-Colonialism
Classification: LCC HT1176 .C35 2024 (print) | LCC HT1176 (ebook) | DDC 306.3/6209171244—dc23/eng/20240416
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023057405
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023057406

Cover photo: Still from Ousmane Sembène's *Black Girl* (Criterion Collection, 2017), courtesy of Janus Films with permission from Alain Sembène. Restored by Cineteca di Bologna / L'Immagine Ritrovata laboratory, in association with the Sembène Estate, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA), Eclair Laboratories, and the Centre National de Cinématographie. Restoration funded by The Film Foundation's World Cinema Project.

For my parents

Suicide sometimes changes the course of history.

MOHAMED MBOUGAR SARR

Death is private, a path down which none
can follow, but also public, because each death is
simultaneously the end of the world.

HERMANN BURGER

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PREFACE

There is no good way to write about suicide. I return to versions of this thesis throughout this book, but the difficulty of writing about something that should not be written about and the tragic valences of which cannot be overstated should be legible at the outset. Studies of suicide, including this one, are marked by belatedness, trespass, and failure.

The Suicide Archive is about death and dying, physical and psychological pain, and almost unfathomable loss. It takes up harrowing, sometimes violent representations of personal and collective suffering. It is traversed and troubled by the real risks involved in writing about "other people's deaths [. . .] as something [some]one 'reads.'"[1] With respect to visual culture, Sampada Aranke has framed these stakes in powerful terms, writing that looking at images of Black pain and anti-Black violence, "coupled with the question of whether or not to write about them, exhausts an already fatigued image-cast that centers anti-Black violence as an everyday visual practice."[2] How to look upon and write about death, disappearance, and dispossession; how to write about the looking, too: these ethical and methodological quandaries permeate *The Suicide Archive*.

To suggest that there is no good way to write about suicide does not mean nothing can be gained from writing about it. Rather, I want to inscribe my own positioning, misgivings, and trespasses as integral to this undertaking. Despite its subject matter, this is a hopeful book insofar as it is also a story about resourcefulness and survival, about new ways of looking at the past, and about how, in the present, we might become more compassionate and skillful readers of histories of loss—how we might create something lasting "on this broken ground."[3]

Faced with and motivated by the complexity of its object, *The Suicide Archive* creates an analytical field for holding the multiple, competing resonances

of suicide in tension. The historical, sociopolitical, and literary contexts of French slavery and colonization in Africa and the Caribbean—especially their archives and afterlives—bring the stakes of reading suicide and/as resistance in the wake of empire into focus. They serve as case studies here. Beyond my own disciplinary formation as a scholar of literature in French, the "Frenchness" of this project pushes back against the specific ways (political) suicide has been historicized, theorized, and canonized, especially in literary studies, *as something distinctly French*—as a product of the French Revolution, Romantic ideal, expression of nineteenth-century malaise, sign of existential ennui, or philosophical limit.[4] I locate the genesis of suicide as a political language and practice of freedom in extremis not in Romantic impulses or Republican values but in the experiences of empire and state violence.

This book argues that *the history of resistance to French empire is also a history of suicide* while recognizing that this dimension of the historical record has been overlooked.[5] *The Suicide Archive* addresses this critical imbalance by showing that literature and, more broadly, aesthetic works (novels, poetry, performance, film, visual artworks) have long registered what otherwise recedes from view. In the absence of archival sources or in the presence of overdetermined (post)colonial scripts, aesthetic works keep alive occulted histories of suicidal resistance. With respect to suicide, aesthetic works do what colonial-imperial accounts and traditional historiographies have failed to do: they stay with suicide, attempting to dwell in its potentially incommensurable significations. They provide, to borrow Édouard Glissant's phrasing, a means of "saying without saying while saying all the while" (*dire sans dire tout en disant*).[6] In some cases, they make recessed or "secret" histories of suicidal resistance available in writing and accessible to the collective historical consciousness for the first time.

The history of suicide under slavery is an ineluctable departure point for a study of suicidal resistance in the world(s) of French colonialism and the cultural productions that emerged in its wake. But it is, for reasons I hope will become clear, neither the end point nor the political horizon of this book, which dedicates an introduction and two chapters (1–2) to suicide in the Atlantic world (the Caribbean and the African littoral) before moving farther afield—to post-Independence Senegal (chapter 3), Algeria (chapter 4), and Morocco (chapter 5). Across this expansive chronology and far-ranging geography, chattel slavery in the Atlantic world remains a central historical and conceptual framework for two main reasons: first, for the powerful ways it lays bare many of the challenges involved in interpreting or "reading" forms of death and dispossession in contexts of unfreedom as resistance; second, for the ways fields such as Black Atlantic studies, slavery and freedom studies, and Black studies

have sharply and sensitively engaged questions of archives and archiving in relation to the production of historical knowledge. It is largely for these reasons that I have found it necessary and useful to begin this book with an overview of suicide under French slavery in my introduction before turning to some of the book's larger claims, presenting its key terms (*suicide archive*, *suicidal resistance*, *the rhetorical force of suicide*), and focusing on its aesthetic archive, which remains haunted by but moves beyond the Black Atlantic.

In *The Suicide Archive*, I am interested in charting a capacious genealogy and telling a complicated, though far from complete, story about individuals who in the face of extreme violence violently disappeared themselves. This story does not adhere to neat chronologies or national borders. It tracks suicidal resistance across a diverse corpus and different historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts. This is not without risks or disadvantages as a scholarly undertaking. Readers will not find here an exhaustive historical accounting or watertight philosophical argument about voluntary death in the French-speaking world. What I offer is something less ambitious but hopefully more generative and elastic: a new way of thinking and writing about suicide, coloniality, and their archives in relation to literary history.

By considering suicidal resistance in the *longue durée* and extending the historical limits of French colonization into the present, I connect suicide as a response to enslavement and empire to other forms of liberatory political violence and examples of what Achille Mbembe calls "transformation through destruction."[7] The far edge of this task becomes clearest in my final chapter, where I consider the case of the suicide bomber and "sacrificial violence."[8] The individual whose suicide kills other people continues to figure a limit to thinking on contemporary violence even though such acts are less frequent and claim fewer victims than colonizing war, drone strikes, and military occupations. This book engages with such complexities and decalages.[9]

The Suicide Archive considers how antislavery and anticolonial suicide belongs more to our present moment than might be thought. The experiences of empire, Atlantic slavery, and colonization continue to haunt the world(s) that emerged in the wake of official abolition and decolonization in profound ways. Current forms of structural inequality, systemic violence, and racial injustice against Black and Arab minorities in the Francosphere are outgrowths of colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial asymmetries. They have their origins in a past that refuses to remain past, to inflect Henry Rousso's famous characterization of Vichy France.[10]

Debates around colonial history, historical memory, and the afterlives of French slavery and colonization have only gathered urgency in recent years with

global #BlackLivesMatter and #mustfall initiatives, as well as calls to "decolonize" curricula and defund the police. These movements are powerful precisely for their transnational scope and transhistorical consciousness. By drawing connections across temporal, spatial, and linguistic boundaries, they condemn and combat anti-Black and anti-Arab violence as far-reaching, deeply historical systems—from the legacies of Atlantic slavery to present-day policing and the flagrant disregard of governments for African life in the context of irregular migration. The parallels between the murder of George Floyd by police in 2020 in the United States and, in France, #JusticePourAdama, referring to the death of Adama Traoré, a twenty-four-year-old Black Frenchman who died in police custody in 2016, are a case in point. In June 2022, twenty-three Black African men were beaten to death by officers at the Morocco-Melilla border. Even more recently, in June 2023, as I finished writing this book, outrage over the policing of and excessive use of force against Black and Arab minorities in France erupted after the shooting of the seventeen-year-old Nahel M. during a police stop. Such violence is not new. It is contiguous with the deathscape of French colonialism, which continues to produce Black/African life as precarious and disposable *in the present*.

The Suicide Archive offers ways forward for thinking through long-standing legacies of "legitimate" state violence by examining the archives of transatlantic slavery and colonization alongside contemporary literary and extraliterary discourses. If past forms of colonial and postcolonial state violence persist in the present, then older forms of resistance, including suicide, can be seen to shadow contemporary modes of refusal and protest. They inspire new practices of freedom and fugitivity. The aesthetic works examined in this book make such genealogies explicit.

The Suicide Archive is primarily a work of literary-historical criticism, although it is perhaps better described as a work of transdisciplinary criticism by someone who happens to be (primarily) a literary-historical scholar. As a complex and largely untold story, suicidal resistance invites new modes of critical and ethical engagement. The ciphered and secret nature of suicide, especially under colonization, calls for working at the interstices and fringes of established discourses, sounding out silences in scriptural accounts, and attending to unconscious or repressed content. *The Suicide Archive* lays out a transgressive interpretive practice that reads and writes across languages, media, archives, and intellectual traditions. By allying close reading and "politicized looking" across languages and media with forensic archival research, oral history, and an investigative mode, this book endeavors to connect aesthetic forms with real lives lost.[11] In this sense, it is inscribed in an ongoing project of accounting,

however imperfectly, for the human toll of centuries of colonial violence in a time of unfinished decolonization.

Above all, this book is an invitation to a mode of literary-historical inquiry based on following traces, compiling evidence, and attempting to render unheard whispers audible. This is a hermeneutic practice that I hope will have "enough capaciousness to travel."[12]

INTRODUCTION

IN ARTICULO MORTIS

I had to be on-site, see the corpses, to learn these facts, for the death of an enslaved man [*un nègre*] is considered of so little importance by authorities and *the masters take so much care to keep the death a secret*. We can conclude these are not the only suicides that have occurred here over the past nine months.

ABBÉ DUGOUJON, *Lettres sur l'esclavage dans les colonies françaises* (1845)

Memory on Trial

The year is 1804. In Basse-Terre, the capital of the French colony of Guadeloupe, a cadaver awaits judgment: a dead man and his "memory" (*mémoire*) are standing trial.[1] In the austere prose of a handwritten procès-verbal, the details of the suicide and postmortem trial of an enslaved man named Azor emerge.[2] On the evening of 27 April, Azor asked his enslaver, Cabre, a printer and bookseller on the island, for money to buy some sweetbread to accompany the dinner of fried fish he was preparing. Cabre gave him the money, and Azor returned home about ten minutes later. Shortly after that, around 8 p.m.,

Azor took an empty pistol from Cabre's bedroom, loaded it with ammunition, placed the barrel against his temple, and "blew his brains out" (*s'est brûlé la cervelle*). The following day, Azor's act of self-destruction was tried as a criminal offense. The details of the trial are summarized in the *minutes du greffe*, court records collating statements and documents from Azor's enslaver and members of the judicial police who arrived on scene the following day to inspect Azor's body.[3]

In French jurisprudence, self-killing was criminalized throughout the Ancien Régime in metropolitan France and in France's colonies into the first decades of the nineteenth century.[4] It was among a handful of crimes (treason, duels, armed rebellions) singled out in Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Criminal Ordonnance of 1670 as the basis for a postmortem trial of "the cadaver or *the memory* of the deceased" (*faire le procès au cadavre ou à la mémoire du défunt*) (Titre XXII, Article 1).[5] In practice, this meant that judges designated someone—ideally a relative of the suicide, so long as they could read and write—as a *curateur* who would speak and be interrogated on behalf of "the cadaver [. . .] if it still existed [. . .] or the deceased's memory" (Titre XXII, Article 2). A *curateur* also was named in cases where the defendant was "mute or deaf or [. . .] refused to respond" (Titre XVIII). The recourse to a *curateur* and to a suicide's "memory" were legal means of making death and disappearance speak.

In 1670, suicide was not yet named as such. The act appears in Colbert's Ordonnance as *homicide de soi-même* (murder of the self). Not until 1734, via the Abbé Prévost, did the English word *suicide*, coined in 1643 from Latin *sui* (self) and *caedes/cide* (killing), enter French, joining existing periphrases (*homicide de soi-même, meurtre de soi-même, attentat contre soi-même*) and giving rise to new expressions (*mort suicide, suicide prémédité, suicide commis en sa personne, suicide involontaire*).[6] As historian Dominique Godineau writes, over the course of the next century "suicide" was renamed and recategorized; a host of new verbal expressions entered usage in French, including the reflexive *se suicider*.[7] These neologisms (*s'homicider soi-même, se défaire soi-même, se noyer le cœur, se détruire soi-même, attenter à ses jours, attenter contre soi-même, s'assassiner, se donner soi-même la mort, s'abréger les jours*) gave names to an act that was hardly "new" and that had been condemned by the Church and European governments since the Middle Ages.[8] But the criminalization, prosecution, and codification of suicide *as suicide* throughout the eighteenth century was novel and increasingly a topic of public debate.[9]

In the archives of French slavery and colonization, the notion of putting "memory" on trial takes on powerful, far-ranging resonances. Indeed, the legal expression *faire le procès à la mémoire* emerges as a prescient metaphor for the

stakes of France's ever-deferred reckoning with its colonial past. From the legacies of chattel slavery in the Atlantic world to the violence of the Algerian War of Independence, to the more recent history of France's irradiation of numerous sites in the Sahara and Pacific Ocean and systemic violence against Black and Arab minorities, France remains embroiled in "memory wars" related to crimes for which it has yet to stand trial and bodies it refuses to claim.

In Azor's case, the trial of "memory" raises questions that are far from metaphorical. The criminalization of suicide under French law supposed *mens rea* (that is, "intent or knowledge of wrongdoing"). Although many considered the postmortem trials and punishments of suicides unusually cruel, this fact was not especially remarkable for your average French *citoyen*, free men and women, who ended their days.[10] But for enslaved people who died by suicide, the supposition of *mens rea* meant they were tried posthumously as criminals whose insurrectional acts threatened public order and not as "property" (*biens meubles*), as they were inscribed in the Code Noir (1685), the legal decree defining the conditions of chattel slavery in France's colonies.[11] In a perverse paradox of French colonial law, suicide was one of the only instances where enslaved Africans appeared legally as "persons," momentarily gaining the juridical "force" of autonomous subjects.[12]

That a detailed record of Azor's death exists is extraordinary. As Christopher M. Church points out, natural disasters and civil unrest throughout the French Caribbean "destroyed numerous governmental records and administrative minutes" and "incinerated countless written accounts."[13] Moreover, as my epigraph from the Catholic priest and abolitionist writer Abbé Casimir Dugoujon makes clear, the deaths of enslaved men, women, and children were ascribed little importance beyond numerical (and monetary) value. Registers of deaths of the enslaved captured the sparsest details: name, approximate age, gender, and racial category (*nègre, négresse, mulâtresse, nègre nouveau-né*); time and place of death; and the identity of the enslaver. From the same year as Azor's trial, death records of the enslaved in Guadeloupe are so chillingly succinct that Azor's procès-verbal reads like a biographical document by comparison.[14]

In addition to being an individual, private, and deeply personal response to psychological pain and emotional distress, suicide was an insurrectional act that directly disordered and undermined the slave economy. It was kept "secret" in France's colonies for multiple reasons—not least of which was financial gain.[15] Under colonial insurance policies, enslavers were not reimbursed for the loss of enslaved men and women who died by suicide. This stipulation contrasted with indemnification policies applied to other causes of death, which could be the legitimate basis for insurance claims.[16] In his *Traité des assurances*

et des contrats à la grosse (1783), considered the authoritative text on commercial maritime law during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Balthazard-Marie Émérigon spells out this grim calculus:

> If animals or the enslaved [*des Nègres*] have died a natural death, or even when the enslaved [*des Nègres*], in desperation, have taken their own lives, the Insurer is not bound by it; because these are losses arrived at by nature, or the defect of the thing [*le vice de la chose*], or sometimes by negligence of the Master, which cannot be imputed to the Insurer, if he is not expressly responsible for it; another thing would be if they were drowned in a storm or killed in a fight.[17]

By dying by their own hands, enslaved Africans deprived enslavers of forced human labor as well as any monetary compensation.

For these same reasons—withdrawal of labor, refusal of colonial power—suicide could be a form of personal revenge. As Church explains, fire was the slave's preferred tool of insurrection throughout the French Atlantic, leading the governor of Guadeloupe to declare in 1899 that, at one point in Caribbean history, "the torch was the only instrument of vengeance left to the slave."[18] But suicide and death by fire(arm)—or rope, or drowning, or any number of other means—arguably were the slave's true "last resort." As Jean Raynaud writes in his unpublished study on suicide under colonization, *Essai sur le suicide en Afrique noire* (1934–35), suicide, not arson, was the slave's "only vengeance, his only means of protest, to show that even in taking everything from him they [could] not take away his final right": that is, the right to die.[19]

When the suicides of enslaved men, women, and children were recorded in official documents, as in the case of Azor, colonial administrators were at pains to demonstrate the infrequency of such acts and to show that they were not linked directly to the routinized violence of enslavement. If the body of the suicide could not be covered up or disappeared, then it was important to demonstrate that the death was the result of mental pathology. An example of this tendency from one of the highest levels of colonial oversight is the report published by the Minister of the Navy and Colonies—Ange René Armand, the baron de Mackau—who in 1845 instituted a series of policies known as the Lois Mackaus intended to ameliorate the status of the enslaved before outright abolition.[20] In his report, Mackau presents scant data on slave suicide to demonstrate the efficacy of his new legislation, aiming to show that under the new Mackau Laws slaves were less desperate and, ultimately, less suicidal. Of the nineteen suicides reported by Mackau, only one—after a failed attempt at *marronage*—is connected indirectly to the actual conditions of enslavement.

The rest are explained in purely psychological terms (*chagrin, ivresse, aliénation mentale, désespoir*). This psychological "turn" in explaining slave suicide by no means reflects sensitivity to the psychological traumas of enslavement or awareness of the unconscious effects of colonialism—psychoanalytic phenomena that have received lucid, indeed clinical, analysis in works by thinkers such as Albert Memmi (*The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 1957), Frantz Fanon (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961), and Achille Mbembe (*Critique of Black Reason*, 2013).[21] Nor should it be read as a precursor to the ideation-to-action theories of suicide guiding modern studies of the progression from suicidal ideation to suicide attempts.[22] Rather, such explanations come directly from the repertoire of eighteenth-century "causes" for suicide in metropolitan France—which included *chagrin, ennui, faiblesse d'esprit, mélancolie, ivresse, démence*, and *maladie de folie*.[23] Their application in colonial contexts pathologized and naturalized suicidal ideation among the colonized. Suicide and its attendant explanations (melancholia, chagrin, nostalgia, ennui) were theorized in colonial pseudoscience as "maladies des nègres"—afflictions to which the enslaved supposedly were predisposed.[24]

The minutes of the trial of Azor reflect this self-absolving tendency, locating the suicidal impulse in the psyche of the enslaved man and not the murderous system entrapping him. It is noted simply that his enslaver "could not imagine the motive that led Azor to destroy himself [*se détruire*], having always treated him well." The act seemed premeditated, the report speculates, because Azor would have had to buy ammunition beforehand. Perhaps some of the money requested for sweetbread went toward this purchase.

In his statement, a member of the judicial police suggests that Azor's suicide invited the revival of a particular form of public postmortem punishment: "In the past, those who put an end to their existence by violent means were stretched and quartered [*traînait sur la claie*], it would perhaps be appropriate for this example to be reinstated." Known as the *supplice de la claie* or the *claie d'infamie*, this form of torture involved desecrating the body of a suicide by stretching the corpse across a wooden frame that was hitched to a horse and dragged through streets and public squares.[25] Popularized in Ancien Régime France, the *claie d'infamie* was employed throughout metropolitan France and France's colonies as a suicide deterrent, along with other grisly spectacles of "biopower"—the term Michel Foucault uses to describe techniques of administering and regulating human life to produce subjugated bodies.[26] Many of these punishments were specific to voluntary death, such as hanging suicides by their feet after postmortem trials: an inversion of traditional hangings, intended to dehumanize the cadaver, stringing it up like an animal or, according to Christian symbol-

ism, the head pointed downward signifying eternal damnation.[27] Such practices were outlawed in the metropole following the French Revolution when suicide was decriminalized; they persisted in France's colonies—sites that remained governed not by the revolutionary ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, but by regimes of Black death or what Achille Mbembe calls "necropolitics."[28]

Under French slavery, the *claie d'infamie* and other forms of desecration (decapitation and dismemberment) were popular forms of punishment for slave suicide because it was thought that defiling the cadavers of the enslaved prevented the transmigration of souls and thus would discourage enslaved men and women from seeking out such a fate.[29] Forms of postmortem desecration joined a grim repertoire of torture techniques that terrorized the bodies of the enslaved, whether dead or alive. Some of these torture spectacles also applied to free French subjects who bucked colonial authorities, such as Millet de la Girardière and Pierre Barse.[30] Widely deployed and perfected under slavery, techniques of torture, mutilation, desecration, and humiliation continued to haunt the postslavery moment long after they disappeared from use in France's colonies. This is especially true in the Caribbean and Indian Ocean, in the contexts of indentured labor, and in Africa, where colonial strategies of oppression, violence, forced labor, and policing directly informed postcolonial regimes.[31] The morbid "display" of colonized bodies and the literal conditions of forced displacement and captivity extended well into the twentieth century in the form of France's *zoos humains* (human zoos), colonial expositions where many "participants" died under horrific conditions, from untreated injuries and illnesses, or from suicide.[32]

Despite the suggestion of the judicial police, it is unclear whether Azor's body was desecrated or displayed. This, along with other details, is absent from the minutes of the trial in 1804. Other key facts, equally absent from the court records, allow us to grasp the significance of Azor's act of self-destruction more fully and to understand the political backdrop against which his suicide and trial unfolded. Azor only recently had been re-enslaved. He lived as a free man for almost a decade, from the time of the first French abolition of slavery in 1794 until Napoleon Bonaparte's troops, led by General Antoine Richepanse, landed in Guadeloupe in 1802 to reestablish slavery. Azor witnessed and likely participated in the fierce, anti-French resistance mounted against Napoleon's army by the formerly enslaved: a resistance movement that culminated in the suicides of its leaders Joseph Ignace, who shot himself at Baimbridge—and whose head was displayed on a pike in Pointe-à-Pitre—and Louis Delgrès, who detonated a massive suicide bomb, exploding himself along with three hundred of his followers and many French troops at Matouba in a last stand

against Richepanse's men. Azor's trial in the last week of April 1804 occurred less than a month after Napoleon's Code Civil des Français was adopted (21 March 1804), though it would not reach Guadeloupe until late 1805. When it did, it applied only to French citizens, not to the (re)enslaved, whose lives—and deaths—remained governed by the Code Noir.[33] Though meager in detail, the minutes of Azor's trial are enough to excavate a singular human tragedy and a recessed genealogy of suicidal resistance to French slavery and colonization.

Suicide under Slavery

Azor's trial distills a pervasive and harrowing historical reality: Amerindians and sub-Saharan Africans frequently resisted capture, enslavement, and re-enslavement at the hands of Europeans—and, in the case of the trans-Saharan trade in human beings, North African slavers—through suicide.[34] Throughout Africa and the Caribbean, captive Africans and besieged Caribs leaped from great heights; tore open their throats; consumed dirt, sand, and ash.[35] They refused to eat; deliberately exposed themselves to the elements or to illness; dashed their heads against rocks or the sides of slave ships; self-asphyxiated by "swallowing" their tongues; choked, hanged, poisoned,[36] burned, shot, and drowned themselves to avoid capture or to put an end to their enslavement.[37] Suicidal resistance to slavery was so widespread from the very beginning of the slave trade that one of the earliest "how-to" books on maritime commerce, Jacques Savary's *Le parfait négociant* (1675), encouraged captains to set sail as quickly as possible because captives were at risk for suicide the moment they were taken onboard.[38]

Suicide under slavery was a devastating, deeply complicated gesture carried out by enslaved men, women, and occasionally children, individually and collectively. Its timeline cannot easily be arrested with the second abolition of French slavery in 1848, when old forms of enslavement and forced labor adapted, persisted, and transformed—not least through the many permutations of indentured servitude or *engagisme*, based in Napoleon III's policy of *rachat préalable*, instituted in 1856, which effectively replaced chattel slavery in France's Caribbean, African, and Indian Ocean colonies.[39] In other French-occupied territories, especially the Sahara-Sahel region—in places like Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, and Mali—local forms of slavery continued well into the first half of the twentieth century and, in some cases, until Independence. Antislavery suicide casts a long shadow on the world the French empire made, from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean to North Africa.

The vehemency and violence with which enslaved and colonized persons were prepared to die on their own terms and by their own hands contradicted

long-held European assumptions that suicide was a "Western" phenomenon and that Africans, in general, did not take their own lives.[40] The belief that Africans did not kill themselves contrasted with an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French Orientalist fascination with "exotic" cultures of suicide, such as the Indian sati or the seppuku of Japanese samurai. Within the racist imperial imaginary, Africans were thought not sufficiently "civilized" to exhibit a behavior that, by the nineteenth century, Europeans considered a marker of modern malaise. In a short medical treatise titled "Le suicide parmi les noirs" (1894), Georges Liengme, a French medical missionary working in South Africa, thus expresses genuine surprise at discovering suicide among "pre-contact" African societies:

> A Black man tired of life! That's not part of the African idyll. And yet, no offense to those who still believe in the reality of this idyll, there are suicides even among Africans who have not yet come into contact with the Whites of civilized life. Let us declare it straight away, cases of suicide are rarer than in civilized countries; this is easily understood. They increase when Indigenous populations live near Whites.[41]

Suicide was thought to be virtually unknown south of the Sahara. However, as French colonial presence in Africa increased throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, authors began to revisit the idea that African societies were somehow "immune" to suicide. They faced overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Throughout the slave trade and the emergent slave societies in the Caribbean basin and along the African littoral during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, the suicides of enslaved persons were widespread enough that Europeans dissertated at length about ways to keep Africans from destroying themselves.[42] In Cuba, during the 1840s, the rates of slave suicide on certain plantations became so high that an emergency colonial committee was convened to identify ways of discouraging suicide among the enslaved population.[43] After slavery was finally abolished in France's colonies in 1848, suicide among indentured laborers continued at rates high enough to provoke ongoing concern among plantation owners.[44]

For white abolitionists such as Victor Schœlcher, suicide most clearly exposed the horrors of the slave trade and plantation system. As a "direct, immediate consequence" and "striking condemnation" of slavery, it made a compelling ethical and rhetorical argument for abolition.[45] For slavers, planters, and ship captains, slave suicide was anything but a moral quandary. It indexed a failure of European control and incurred a material loss through the destruction of the salable "goods" of human cargo. Throughout the Atlantic

slave trade, Europeans conducted (pseudo)medical and sociological studies on slave suicide as part of a cottage industry of colonial science—a body of interested "nosopolitical" medical knowledge related to slavery.[46]

The statistics on slave suicide, though sketchy and hard to come by, are staggering: abolitionist Benjamin Frossard cites one voyage of a certain Captain Phillips, who refused to take measures to dissuade suicide among the enslaved, leading to a loss of almost half (320 out of 700) of the captives on board.[47] These were "suicide epidemics" (*épidémies de morts volontaires*), in which suicidality spread like a "contagion."[48] More than a revolt—during which enslavers could "justify" the murder of the enslaved and make a legitimate insurance claim—collective suicide was to be avoided at all costs.[49] Along these lines, enslavers introduced specific disciplinary sanctions and uniquely cruel punishments for suicidal captives, including holding burning coals to the lips of captives who refused to eat, pouring molten lead into the mouths of suicidal slaves, or cutting off their legs or arms in order to "terrify" captives away from attempting suicide.[50] Enslavers strategically manipulated Indigenous slave religiosity to shape views of voluntary death by convincing the enslaved that transmigration was possible only if the body remained intact after death. They developed new instruments to prevent self-destruction, such as the *speculum oris*, a vise used to force-feed suicidal slaves, and cross-shaped wooden bits to prevent captives from self-asphyxiating by swallowing their tongues (figure I.1).[51] They installed nets around the gunwales of slave ships to discourage captive Africans from leaping overboard.[52] It is one of the great ironies of imperial history that Europeans first extensively innovated with methods of suicide prevention and experimented with technologies of "keeping alive" in the context of chattel slavery in the Atlantic world: a necropolitical institution maintained through Black death.[53]

For captive and enslaved Africans, suicide had other significations and participated in other ecologies of meaning. Within many African cosmologies, the transition between life and death is not viewed as an absolute rupture. As Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu writes, "The African world of the dead [. . .] is in no sense another world, but rather a part of this world, albeit a conceptually problematic part."[54] Voluntary death could be viewed as a means of agency, reunion, return, and transmigration or metempsychosis.[55] It was a form of fugitivity and "Afro-Atlantic flight."[56] This belief gave rise to the figure of the "flying African" who resisted enslavement, disappeared, and soared home to Africa through death.[57] Originally rooted in the collective suicide of seventy Nigerian captives at a site in Georgia now known as Igbo or Ebos Landing, flying Africans were part of what Sophie Nahli Allison has characterized as

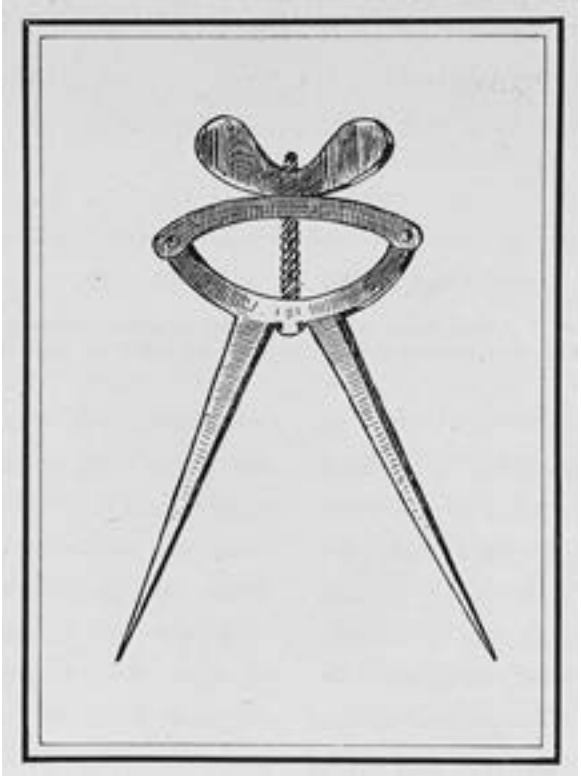

FIGURE I.1. A *speculum oris*, a vise used to force-feed suicidal slaves. Source: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. "A vise used on slave ships to force open the mouths of slaves for feeding purposes," New York Public Library Digital Collections, accessed 3 June 2022, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-9d3d-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

"an oral archive of resistance" connecting voluntary death to an emancipatory flight from slavery and movement toward Black liberation.[58] This defiance of tyranny through death resonates with Huey Newton's concept of "revolutionary suicide" and the Black pan-African liberation movements of the late twentieth century.[59]

Less attention has been given to the cultural contexts and systems of meaning of suicide in Africa, especially in sites along the West African slave route, where self-destruction not only long served as a form of resistance to conquest, capture, and enslavement but also was viewed as a self-affirming and self-preserving dignifying act. For his part, Léopold Sédar Senghor reads suicide as a manifestation of Black African *dyom* (*jom*) or "dignity" in Wolof and thus as a pan-African value and Indigenous African philosophical concept older than both Islam and Christianity.[60]

As the suicide of Azor in 1804 suggests, suicide sometimes was premeditated and carefully planned, but often the suicides and parasuicides of enslaved

persons were spontaneous and improvisatory.[61] They took advantage of the temporary disorder generated by an insurrection,[62] or capitalized on sudden access to something that could be transformed into a means of self-destruction: a bit of twine, a blade, a shard of glass, a poisonous substance, a body of water.[63] Suicide also occurred as a direct response to severe corporal punishments or threats thereof.[64] Many enslaved men and women died by suicide in prison while awaiting public torture and execution.[65]

Some enslaved individuals dressed entirely in white before taking their own lives, suggesting that voluntary death had certain ritualistic vestimentary markers associated with it. This appears to be true not only in the French Caribbean but across the Atlantic world.[66] In Jessey Torrey's *A Portraiture of Domestic Slavery* (1817), for instance, we find a haunting image of an enslaved woman's "flight" from slavery: an engraving of a Black woman, barefoot in a luminous white shift, leaping from the open window of a garret into an otherwise empty cobblestone street (figure I.2).[67] The illustration captured a real incident: the attempted suicide of an enslaved woman named Anna, who in 1815 leaped from the top floor of George Miller's "slave tavern" on F Street in Washington, DC. Miraculously, she survived, despite breaking both legs and badly injuring her back.

Such visual representations of suicide under slavery are rare and noticeably absent from studies of the imaging of suicide in the Western world.[68] But images of slave suicide circulated widely throughout the French and British Atlantic worlds during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The different editions of Thomas Day and John Bicknell's antislavery epistle in verse *The Dying Negro*, first published in 1773 and dedicated to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, featured frontispieces depicting an enslaved man in chains and clothed in a bright white loincloth, wielding a dagger as he prepares to kill himself (figures I.3 and I.4). Like the account of Anna's leap, Day's and Bicknell's poem was based on a real event: the suicide of an enslaved man reported in the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* of 28 May 1773.

In the French press of the nineteenth century, we find more graphic depictions of slave suicide. In the Sunday, 22 August 1886, issue of the *Journal des Voyages*, the entire front page was taken up by a dramatic scene by Georges Lemoine, an engraver who illustrated Émile Zola's and Guy de Maupassant's novels. Reminiscent of the spectacular, often gruesome images in the *Illustrated Police News*, a British crime tabloid whose explicit illustrations brought suicide into public view, Lemoine's engraving portrays an enslaved African man in a white jumpsuit, his hands tied behind his back, crushing his head between two railway cars (figure I.5).

FIGURES I.2–I.5. Visual representations of suicide under slavery, eighteenth–nineteenth centuries. Figure I.2: Anna's leap. Source: Jesse Torrey, *A portraiture of domestic slavery, in the United States: with reflections on the practicability of restoring the moral rights of the slave, without impairing the legal privileges of the possessor; and a project of a colonial asylum for free persons of colour: including memoirs of facts on the interior traffic in slaves, and on kidnapping: Illustrated with engravings* (Philadelphia, 1817), 46. Figure I.3: Frontispiece to *The dying negro*, 2nd ed. Source: Thomas Day and John Bicknell, *The dying negro, a poem* (London: Flexney, 1775), n.p. Figure I.4: Frontispiece to *The dying negro*, 3rd ed. Source: Thomas Day and John Bicknell, *The dying negro, a poem: By the late Thomas Day and John Bicknell, Esquires. To which is added, a fragment of a letter on the slavery of the negroes. By Thomas Day, Esq. Embellished with a frontispiece* (London: John Stockdale, 1793), 26, digitized by the British Library (11644.d.57). Figure I.5: Front-page image of 22 August 1886 edition of *Journal des voyages*. Source: "Les esclaves au Brésil—Il se fit écraser la tête entre deux tampons," *Journal des voyages*, no. 476 (22 August 1886): [1] (n.p.).

In some cases, suicide under French slavery was a spectacular and highly visible "performance" in which self-fashioning and self-finishing radically coincided.[69] Schœlcher describes one striking "scene" of suicide in Martinique in 1844 when an enslaved man hanged himself from a tree below the windows of the governor's residence, providing a powerful indictment of slavery and the colonial administration shortly before abolition.[70] Writing about the period leading up to the Revolution of Saint-Domingue, Antoine Métral describes witnessing "up to thirty slaves take their own lives [*se donner la mort*], on the same day, at the same hour, ending their misery together, and in the throes of death, letting the joy of breaking the chains of slavery burst forth together."[71] In other cases, suicides sought death through slower, less visible means, such as willful exposure to the elements or to disease and starvation, and other "suicide-like" behaviors.[72] Sometimes death by suicide came after a psychotic break resulting from the traumas and violence of slavery, at which point the enslaved person was said to have "lost their mind";[73] at other times one was simply "overcome with grief" (*prise de chagrin*) or "desperation" (*désespoir*).

Schœlcher documents the suicide of an enslaved woman named Justine in these terms, describing how she began to consume dirt before cutting her throat:

> On September 8, 1846, an enslaved woman [*une négresse*] Justine, belonging to the Boulogne estate (Guadeloupe), added one more name to the great and solemn protest of those individuals made desperate by servitude. [. . .] She was overcome with grief [*prise de chagrin*], as the Creoles say, and, we are assured, began to eat dirt. To prevent her from doing so, she had been tied to the bar for a few days when, on September 8, she cut her throat with a knife.[74]

Consuming dirt or other soil-like substances—a practice known as *geophagia* or diagnosed as the medical condition *pica*—is a nearly universal phenomenon.[75] In the case of slavery, however, ingesting dirt, ash, chalk, and other non-food items was a well-known suicidal or parasuicidal resistance practice, diagnosed in the racialized colonial medical discourse as the disease "cachexia Africana."[76] In abolitionist and proslavery texts alike, it was connected to other illnesses, such as "drapetomania," a "morbid desire to flee servitude" believed to be "a kind of madness congenital to black slaves."[77] The Père Labat diagnoses it as a symptom of *la mélancolie noire* (black melancholy), which, he writes, leads the enslaved "to eat earth, ash, lime and other things of that nature."[78] Labat's *mélancolie noire*, although it sounds something like a "postcolonial melancholia" (Paul Gilroy) or Afropessimism (Frank Wilderson) *avant la lettre*, recalls

the vocabulary of psychological explanations for suicide during the eighteenth century.[79] Labat's "diagnosis" further reflects the rapidly growing body of pseudomedical and ethnographic literature on enslaved and colonized populations, groups that were thought to be predisposed to extreme chagrin, nostalgia, desperation, depression, suicidal ideation, and languorous voluntary deaths.[80] We find avatars of this belief in European depictions of enslaved and/or displaced Black subjects from Oroonoko to Ourika.

In his *Guide médical aux Antilles* (1834), Michel-Gabriel Levacher similarly identifies geophagia as a method of *lent suicide* (slow suicide) common among the enslaved, writing that "the afflictions of the soul give rise, among slaves [*chez le nègre*], to the resolution to poisoning and decided them to these slow suicides [. . .]. Despondency [*chagrin*] seizes their soul; they become indolent and pusillanimous; they eat dirt in order to put an end to their existence."[81] He further notes that enslaved men and women regularly self-poisoned by ingesting dirt and other substances so that they would be too sick to work, encouraging their children to do the same.[82] The practice was so common that enslavers placed "mouth-locks" on slaves to prevent them from earth-eating.[83] In his *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil* (1834–39), the French artist Jean Debret depicts a young enslaved woman in a mouth-lock (figure I.6), describing the "distressing spectacle of the tinplate mask in which the face of this victim is enveloped—a sinister indicator of the resolution she had made to die [*se faire mourir*] by eating earth."[84] Debret adds, in a footnote, that "this force of character, called a vice by slaveowners, is most commonly found among certain African peoples [*nations nègres*] impassioned by liberty."[85]

In each case, the suicides and parasuicidal practices of enslaved persons inspired fear, uncertainty, anger, distress, and grief—but also, occasionally, resolve and approbation—in the immediate enslaved and free communities, for the slave trade and plantation system, and among global abolitionist networks.[86] As a state of exception that Orlando Patterson termed "social death" and Mbembe theorizes as "necropolitics," chattel slavery upended—indeed inverted—basic positivist assumptions about the sanctity of life, and thus about the meaning or value of taking one's life.[87] In this context, suicide could hardly be considered a straightforward act of resistance—a defiant triumph, a principled martyrdom—nor a simple capitulation to colonial power.[88] It is better understood as a harrowing event: a personally, politically, and historically charged act of life-affirming necroresistance. The political, historical, and cultural significance of slave suicide resounded far beyond the circumstances and context of a singular act of individual or collective self-killing.

FIGURE 1.6. Detail of illustration from *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil*, vol. 2 (1835) showing an enslaved woman wearing a mouth-lock to prevent her from eating dirt. Source: "Une visite à la campagne" (planche 10) in Jean Baptiste Debret, *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil, ou, Séjour d'un artiste français au Brésil, depuis 1816 jusqu'en 1831 inclusivement [. . .]* (Paris: Didot Frères, 1834–39), vol. 2 (1835), [169] (n.p.).

Azor's Silence

While it remains possible to trace and historicize European attitudes toward slave suicide across various sources (legal archives, insurance policies, scientific treatises, coroners' reports, newspaper articles, abolitionist tracts, literary texts), discerning the meanings of voluntary death for members of the enslaved and colonized community is a more difficult endeavor. In the case of French slavery, this difficulty is part of a profound "silence" conditioning access to the voices of the enslaved and formerly enslaved.[89] This is the spectral silence of Azor, whose own "voice" appears under erasure, ventriloquized in a procès-verbal forgotten in French archives.

The silence of Azor is paradigmatic insofar as erasure and absence haunt and hinder any study of suicide under slavery.[90] This is not only because many records related to French slavery and colonization have been damaged or destroyed.[91] Nor is it simply because, as Christopher L. Miller writes in *The French Atlantic Triangle* (2007), there "*are no real slave narratives in French*," or, as Louis Sala-Molins asserts, because "we have at our disposal [in French] not a single written testimony on the reality of slavery coming from a slave."[92] Compared to a rich Anglo-American scriptural tradition of firsthand accounts of slavery by the formerly enslaved—texts such as Phillis Wheatley's poetry, Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Wicked Traffic of the Slav-*

ery and Commerce of the Human Species (1787), and Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789)—lack of more direct access to stories about slavery appears stark and daunting.[93] At the very least, it requires other ways of doing history. It demands, as Church writes, reading "against the grain of documents produced at the top in order to arrive at an image from below."[94]

It is important not to overstate such challenges. Blanket claims about silences, absences, and aporia structuring the archive of slavery and colonization risk fetishizing disappearance and impasse. It is true, as historian Terri Snyder writes in her pathbreaking study of suicide and slavery in British North America, *The Power to Die* (2015), that the enslaved did not leave suicide notes.[95] But it is equally true that suicide, as the case of Azor shows, was one of the few means by which the enslaved appeared themselves onto the historical and legal record. There is a further risk, in insisting on archival lacunae, of suggesting that "silencing" is something that belongs to the colonial past—something other people did and contemporary scholarship and modern record-keeping stand to undo. The reality is that suicide perhaps suffers most from critical silences here and now: namely, a continued reticence on the part of scholars toward integrating acts of self-destruction into mainstream accounts of French slavery and colonization. Following Michel-Rolph Trouillot, we might characterize this as the "silence of resistance thrown against a superior silence."[96] In contrast to the extensive literature on suicide in metropolitan France from the eighteenth century onward, there is a near total silence with respect to the suicides of enslaved or colonized peoples.

This is not to say that metropolitan literature failed to register the phenomenon of suicide as a response to colonizing violence. While representations of suicide in French literature frequently fed racist tropes of "principled" Africans who honorably (and freely) "chose" death over enslavement, suicide served a range of rhetorical and political ends within humanitarian and abolitionist discourses. Some of the most important, widely circulated works of abolitionist fiction in French depict the suicides of enslaved persons centrally or at key moments.[97] Gabriel Mailhol's *Le philosophe nègre* (1764), for instance, opens with the exiled African prince Tintillo preparing to slit his own throat. He evokes the horrors of the Middle Passage in precise terms, mordantly noting that "in the course of the voyage, we *only* found that 189 had stabbed, suffocated, or hanged themselves."[98] In *Paul et Virginie* (1788)—a text idyllically remembered by French literature's most famous suicide, Emma Bovary ("She had read *Paul et Virginie* . . ")—the fugitive enslaved woman covered in scars who throws herself at Virginie's feet in desperation is headed to drown herself. Finally, in Victor Séjour's "Le Mulâtre" ("The Mulatto," 1837), a short story

about miscegenation whose plot revolves around the cruelties of the Code Noir, the titular "mulatto," Georges, carries out patricide and suicide.[99] The phenomenon of slave suicide would seem to occupy a more important place in abolitionist literature and in philosophical reflections on Atlantic slavery than has been acknowledged previously.

The forms of contemporary silencing regarding the interrelation of suicide, slavery, and colonization are pervasive. As philosopher Ian Hacking writes, while suicide may seem like a "timeless option"—discussed by essayists as varied as Cicero, Hume, and Sartre—its theorization can be historicized: "It might better be described as a French obsession."[100] By the end of the long nineteenth century—a period coinciding with France's most intense imperial expansion into North and West Africa—the nascent medical and sociological literature included "so much information about French suicides that [Émile] Durkheim could use suicide to measure social pathology."[101]

It is revealing that the father of suicidology makes only two references to France's colonies in *Le suicide* (1897), both in footnotes. First, in his discussion of "fatalistic suicide" (*le suicide fataliste*), Durkheim struggles to find contemporary examples, noting that this type of suicide is "of so little importance today" and "it is so difficult to find examples of it that it seems useless for us to linger here."[102] He turns instead to historical examples, evoking the history of French slavery as a distant past and abstract problem, musing, Is it not "to this type [of suicide] that the suicides of slaves are connected, which are said to be frequent under certain conditions?"[103] Durkheim returns to France's far-flung colonies in a footnote on military suicides, where he observes that increases in military suicide "occurred exactly at the moment when the period of colonial expansion was beginning."[104] Writing during France's bloody occupation of Algeria, Durkheim's concern is for *French* soldiers who cannot bear the traumas of colonizing war, not the thousands of Africans destroying themselves and their cities in deadly acts of resistance against French conquest. The oversight and bracketing of histories of suicidal resistance to French colonizing violence continue to organize critical reflections on suicide today. At the time of this writing, more scholarly attention continues to be accorded to the "suicide epidemic" that took place in metropolitan France during the 2000s—and especially to the thirty-five deaths by suicide of French employees in 2019—than to the countless suicides during the long, ongoing histories of French slavery and colonial and neocolonial expansion.[105]

We might speculate as to *why* histories of suicidal resistance in former sites of French empire have not received the critical attention they deserve. Part of this oversight stems from the kinds of memorial impasses and pervasive

"silences" (archival, historical, critical, and otherwise) related to French slavery and colonization discussed earlier. Moreover, it seems worth pointing out that only very recently have forms of resistance to French slavery received sustained scholarly attention.[106] Nor is suicide-as-abnegation easily integrated into triumphant narratives of abolition, independence, and nation-building or positivist historical accounts. Though occasionally recuperated as revolutionary acts (the suicide of Delgrès, for instance), there exist innumerable other, less spectacular, and in many ways far lonelier, suicides that fall through the cracks of grand historical accounts.

So-called borderline or "limit" cases, such as suicide bombing and self-burning protests, put additional pressure on a term—*suicide*—that covers a range of behaviors and outcomes and that today, as Drew Daniel writes in his study of suicide in early modern English literature, *Joy of the Worm* (2022), is "saddled with overfamiliar connotations of pathology and mood disorder."[107] For this reason, Daniel prefers the term *self-killing* to *suicide* throughout his study, especially given that during the early modern period, the former term was supplanted by the latter, and the semantic and cultural shifts engendered by the transition were significant. I, on the other hand, use these terms—as well as others, such as *voluntary death*, *self-destruction*, and *death by suicide*—somewhat interchangeably, not because such fine-grained distinctions are not useful or illuminating but because (1) by the late eighteenth century, when this study begins, the word *suicide* had entered French, in everyday parlance and legal documents; and (2) the primary aesthetic works analyzed here vary greatly in how they refer to instances of self-killing. To put it another way, in my own analytical language I tend to prefer contemporary conventions ("to die by suicide" versus "to commit suicide") but defer to the works under analysis when it comes to tracking how suicide is named.

I suspect, too, that the fact that suicide remains a cultural taboo in much of the French-speaking (and, for that matter, English-speaking) world remains a sticking point and might otherwise discourage work on a topic that engages so many disciplines (psychology, history, sociology, anthropology, literature, philosophy). There is, relatedly, the bald fact that suicide is extremely difficult to write and read about. This is true not only on a methodological level but also on a personal, emotional, and psychosomatic level. As I write in my preface, there simply is no "good" way to write about suicide. There is even the risk, or fear, that reading and writing about suicide, or consuming various kinds of media related to suicide, encourages suicidal ideation—though many studies suggest that the opposite is true, that such activities serve as "protective factors."[108] None of this fully explains the frequency and interest with which

various kinds of scholarship are carried out on suicide in metropolitan France, from the Middle Ages to the present, in contrast to the near total lack of scholarly attention to suicide in countries formerly colonized by France and/or part of the so-called Global South. This disparity speaks more readily, I think, to a long and ongoing history of violent indifference to Black and African life.

Archiving Suicide, Reading Resistance

For these reasons, the phenomenon of suicidal resistance under and after French empire is not easily accommodated within existing interpretive frameworks or consistently legible within traditional archives. Alongside other forms of bodily resistance such as marronage, self-mutilation, hunger strikes, parasuicide, and infanticide, suicide under slavery and colonization revealed a troubling threshold between forms of self-destruction and forms of self-actualization. It served as a bodily contestation of unlivable violence and a revolutionary appeal for an altogether different order: a world-breaking and world-making act at the irreducible intersection between technologies of the self and assemblages of the state, private and public spheres.

Suicide refused capture and containment, rejecting the regime of terror to which the enslaved and colonized were subject. As Gayatri Spivak writes, suicide marks an attempt to "go outside of the space-time enclosure when that enclosure means oppression, colonial or gendered or both, undoing history and geography by inscribing the body with death."[109] In the case of slavery, suicide rejected "enclosure" by identifying the world itself *as* enclosure: a structure of containment that, as Tyrone Palmer suggests, "extends to the literal captivity of Blackness in the first instance as that which articulates the World scale."[110] Through suicide, enslaved Africans reclaimed their stolen bodies, refused enclosure—refused the world—and dramatically rejected the status of commodity ascribed to them under the Code Noir but at an immeasurable cost.

One of the through lines of this book, then, is the idea that suicide under slavery and colonization articulates a radical demand for Black freedom at the very moment of death or *in articulo mortis*—that it is a practice of freedom and fugitivity in extremis.[111] At the same time, I share Stephen Best's uneasiness with respect to what he identifies in *None like Us* (2018) as "a certain habit of mind that is triggered when we deal with issues of slavery and death": namely, "a tendency to toggle between positions of martyrdom and nihilism, agency and dispossession."[112] Instead, Best turns to different and, I think, more interesting and complicated questions, asking "whether self-immolation presents a problem for history *writing*; whether [suicide] can even be made available to historical con-

sciousness"; and, elsewhere, "whether the story of slavery"—and here I would add *the story of suicide under slavery*—"can ever be narrated 'from below.'"[113] Are acts of self-suppression, self-immolation, or self-extinguishment, as Best suggests, "unaccountable events [. . .] being conscripted to ends for which they cannot give account"?[114] Do they, as Constantin Fasolt proposes, constitute a "limit" of history?[115] Such questions require going beyond slavery and Blackness into the murky territory of "consider[ing] the sorts of problems [suicide] poses *for* interpretation," for history, and for meaning more generally.[116]

Departing from the premise that suicide *does* pose problems for interpretation and for the writing of history—indeed, for writing and narration in general—I ask *how*, in suicide's wake, aesthetic forms open up dialogic and polyphonic ways of writing history by attending to points of suicidal resistance. How do such works model alternative modes of archiving suicide? How do they respect and reserve—and here I am interested in the etymologies of these words (*respect*, from *re* + *specere*, "to look (back) at"; *reserve*, from *re* + *servare,* "to keep, to hold back")—what is inaccessible, unsayable, unshareable, and unknowable about suicide?[117]

Organizing Principles, Conceptual Threads

Near the end of her study of philosophy in the African novel, *The African Novel of Ideas* (2021), Jeanne-Marie Jackson traces a literary genealogy of what she calls "philosophical suicide."[118] In a chapter titled "Bodies Impolitic: African Deaths of Philosophical Suicide," Jackson writes against a long tradition of scholarship on suicide in Anglophone African literature—exemplified by the deaths of Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Elesin in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975)—clearing space for a different kind of dying. Focusing on "alienated, contemplative characters whose intellectual dispositions lead them [. . .] to court death," she unearths an underexamined lineage in African letters in which "self-reflection" and "self-killing" are entangled, doomed pursuits.[119] But then, in something of an aside, Jackson remarks, "There are, of course, other suicides in modern African literature."[120] It is these "other suicides" and the possibility of reading suicide "otherwise" that this book brings into focus.

The Suicide Archive explores how aesthetic works give shape to the untransmissible and unsayable: the resistance of the subaltern who speaks through dying. It tracks how literary, cinematic, and visual art forms figure and extend subversive genealogies of African and Afro-Caribbean suicidal resistance in former sites of French empire. The aesthetic works examined here all recognize suicide as a

moment of subalternity coming to crisis. They frequently return to "the scene of the crime," to suicides evoked in passing in colonial-era documents, or occasionally taken up by post-Independence narratives of liberation and nation-building, unloosing them from overdetermined meanings and placing them at the center of their creative responses to the colonial past. Across different media, genres, languages, and vocabularies, suicide emerges as a volatile and resistant political language in extremis, a source of insurrectional potential, and a way of voicing a message when no other means will get through.

Entextualizing Suicide

The passage from acts of self-killing to their appearance in/as text warrants some theorization. In her study of the printing of death in colonial West Africa, Stephanie Newell draws on the sociolinguistic notion of "entextualization" or, as she explains, "the transformation of a process into a cultural object that can be interpreted in the manner of text."[121] I find this notion useful both for describing what aesthetic works "do" to suicide and for characterizing my own critical practice. As Michael Silverstein writes, entextualization is the "process of coming to textual formedness."[122] It involves moving a "text" or fragment of discourse from one context to another in the process of creating a new, circulable text. In writing about death and dying, entextualization, Newell suggests, helps "one to appreciate the cultural processes through which a material corpse passes en route to becoming part of a printed corpus of materials about death."[123] The aesthetic works examined throughout this book all *entextualize* suicides, real and imagined, through citational and intertextual moves that extract suicide from an original context (an archival document, an oral history, a historical record, a newspaper article, a literary work) and reinscribe it in another. Of course, colonial-imperial accounts and official documents entextualize suicide, too; it is often in these discursive environments that suicide first is framed or produced *as* resistance. A key difference, however, and what serves as a criterion of selection for the constellation of aesthetic works discussed in *The Suicide Archive*, is that the entextualizations of suicide that interest me here foreground and amplify what I call the "rhetorical force" of suicide, a notion fleshed out later in this introduction. Each of the primary works discussed in *The Suicide Archive* entextualizes traces of "real" suicides, but not to arrive at a straightforward historical account. Rather, such works write into and against historical accounts or existing archives in complex and generative ways, rethinking and rerouting previous entextualizations of suicide to new ends.

The works explored here achieve this rethinking and rerouting not only by entextualizing suicide but also by narrativizing and, in many cases, novelizing

it. Although I draw on a range of materials and media, novels and narratives occupy an important place in this book. The status of the novel, especially the historical novel, in African, Caribbean, and "postcolonial" literary studies has been subject to extensive scrutiny. I want neither to dwell on those debates here nor to fully bracket them. At this juncture in literary studies—in the wake of work by scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and, more recently, Eileen Julien—it seems relatively uncontroversial to point out, as Firdous Azim does, that "the novel is tied to the historical task of colonial, commercial and cultural expansion" (we might add "nationalism" and "globalization") and that its study historically has privileged supposedly "Western" notions such as textuality, modernity, capital accumulation, and liberalism.[124]

The novel as *one possible form* among many for the suicide archive is what most interests me. This boils down to what Jackson calls "the form's inbuilt principles and capacities": namely, in Bakhtin's formulation, the fact that the novel is "multiform in style and variform in speech and voice," that it can "swallow" other genres and registers.[125] This tracks with Greg Forter's suggestion that the postcolonial resuscitation of the novel "develops critiques of colonialism that are totalizing in their ambitions—that oblige us to think beyond both the nation and recent, mono-oceanic paradigms for superseding it" while "enabl[ing] the genre to uncover traces of previous life worlds that resist the totalizing designs of capital."[126] In this sense, the novel form facilitates my gradual expansion of aspects of the Black Atlantic paradigm to other contexts and other bodies of water, namely the Mediterranean and the Seine, as well as my attempts to uncover traces of worlds that have ended on the way to imagining worlds that might yet be.

The origins of the French *roman* in "romance" introduces another fold into this discussion. It prompts us to ask, Is the "subject" of suicide romantic or tragic? Should the story of suicidal resistance be told as romance or tragedy? Such concerns are at the center of David Scott's thesis in *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004) about the narrative frames used to conceptualize colonial history.[127] The works examined throughout *The Suicide Archive* all emerge in tension with narrative and generic frames, even the ones most readily ascribed to them. They resist or refuse the categories of "tragedy" and "romance," as well as "epic." The idiom of suicidal resistance sheds a different kind of light on such distinctions. I call these aesthetic works "suicide archives" in their own right.

On "Suicidal Resistance"

The Suicide Archive studies suicide with its political twin, resistance, positing suicide as a form of necroresistance and a resistant form of subaltern speech.[128] Aesthetic works, I argue, train our capacity to recognize and read this fatal and

fragile idiom. These two terms—*suicide* and *resistance*—are the organizing poles and conceptual pillars of this inquiry. That does not mean, however, that they are stable categories. Nor are they synonyms (*suicide* ≠ *resistance*). Rather, *The Suicide Archive* examines the affinities, tensions, and interplay between "suicide" and "resistance," exploring the risks and rewards of reading them alongside one another.

The term *suicidal resistance* deployed throughout this book describes a double gesture and double bind. It names a real mode of political resistance in which people resist myriad forms of oppression through self-destruction. For Michel Foucault, suicide is one of the many "points of resistance" dispersed throughout any power network.[129] Foucault writes:

> In order to exercise a relation of power, there must be on both sides at least a certain form of liberty [. . .] a power can only be exercised over another to the extent that the latter still has the possibility of committing suicide, of jumping out of the window or of killing the other. That means that in relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance, for if there were no possibility of resistance—of violent resistance, of escape, of ruse, of strategies that reverse the situation—there would be no relations of power.[130]

The possibility of suicide as resistance shadows all regimes of power—especially, this book shows, gendered and colonial regimes of power.

"Resistance" also gets at a more general feature of suicide: the extent to which the act simultaneously calls out for and resists interpretation. All suicides confront us with an opaque, dysgraphic, "impossible" text whose author disappears the moment their message comes into being. Suicide resists, even forecloses, attempts at understanding insofar as we want to know *why*, but never can with absolute certainty, not even in the case of a suicide note.[131] The aesthetic works I analyze here do not pretend to achieve any such access, which can only ever be illusory. Their subversive potential resides in how they show that this latter dimension of "resistance"—the resistance of a message whose meaning is never assured—gains urgency and power in contexts where suicide also functions as a practice of bodily resistance and political dissidence, when suicide becomes what James C. Scott calls a "weapon of the weak."[132]

I call this dimension the *rhetorical force* of suicide: its capacity to serve as political speech act, as both counter-conduct and counter-discourse. The rhetorical force of self-killings derives from suicide's tendency to signify in ways that cannot be considered purely referential and that evade or unsettle official discursive channels. This is the source of suicide's power and precarity as

a political idiom. Aesthetic works unfold the double gesture and double bind of suicidal resistance, attuning us to the act's subversive political potential and activating its rhetorical force. They do so, moreover, without domesticating the recalcitrant power of suicide to resist decipherment, foreclose meaning, and keep its silence. The rhetorical force of suicide is my way of drawing out a distinction between the kinds of readings of suicide made available to us through literary versus purely historical lenses.

Understanding suicide as a speech act and, for all intents and purposes, a mode of writing in and out of the archive demands further explanation. Throughout my attempts at close reading and "politicized looking" in this book, I enlist a series of figures, tropes, and metaphors related to language, languaging, textual or sonic production, and forms of marking to get at the *rhetorical force of suicide*. These include impossible inscription/text/speech; trace, ash (Derrida); ghostwriting (Spivak); dysgraphia (Sharpe); glossolalia (Best); idiom; signal, signifier, sign; cipher; and scream. Many of these figures emerge directly from the aesthetic or theoretical works under analysis. They reveal something fundamental and unassimilable about suicide, something I have tried to describe in my thinking of suicidal resistance and the rhetorical force of suicide here: namely, the ways suicide compels and vexes interpretative activity; the inkling that suicide has a semiotics related to but distinct from natural language; and the difficulty of ever fully recuperating suicide to a theory of speech or writing. These all contribute to the strangeness of suicide as a political idiom.

The rhetorical force of suicide flickers in and out of focus. Once again, I find Best's insights useful here, specifically his theorization of the precarious and resistant archival writing he names *rumor*. Best describes rumor's ontology in the archive as "an appearance made possible only in its disappearance; an aspiration registered at the moment of its suppression; a power that reaffirms itself by liquidating its sources."[133] He continues, "Rumor's paraphrase, translation, and transcription *amplifies, rather than dampens, its semantic instability*."[134] One could readily substitute *suicide* for *rumor* in the archive and in Best's definition. Of course, in French, *rumeur* is not simply gossip or everyday prattle but also a murmur—of voices, the sea, the wind. It names a phonic and haptic middle ground between articulate language and unintelligible noise, often analogized to but distinct from speech.

I am most interested and invested in pursuing a version of Best's claim: that suicide-as-rumor resists the interpretive, literary, and hermeneutic activity brought to bear on it by amplifying semantic instability. In and out of the archive, we receive suicide in a mediated and mendacious form—as "paraphrase, translation, and transcription"—not in its original idioms, death and

disappearance, which cannot be translated, which are untranslatable. This is part of a more diffuse claim—an instinct, really—in *The Suicide Archive*: that we should resist recuperating suicide to meaning too quickly or completely, that we should learn to dwell in what is irrecuperable, what can never be redressed, recovered, or saved, and that the tools of literary criticism can help us do this. Such an endeavor takes inspiration from what Brent Hayes Edwards calls a "queer practice of the archive": "an approach to the material preservation of the past that deliberately aims to retain what is elusive, what is hard to pin down, what can't quite be explained or filed away according to the usual categories."[135]

It is noteworthy that in the language of psychoanalysis, "resistance" takes on different, even inverse, meanings from its use in political vocabularies—meanings that are closer to what is at issue in my understanding of suicide's rhetorical force. "Resistance" is the name Sigmund Freud gives to precisely what blocks the psyche's passage to freedom: refractory behaviors—including suicide itself—that Freud initially observed in his female patients in response to his insistence that they "remember the past."[136] Resistance is something that requires "working-through."[137] In this sense, as Jacqueline Rose writes in *The Last Resistance* (2007), resistance is not "the action of the freedom fighter, the struggle against tyranny, the first stirring of the oppressed" but "the mind at war with itself, blocking the path to its own freedom and, with it, its ability to make the world a better, less tyrannical place."[138] In psychoanalysis, resistance becomes "resistance of the conscious to the unconscious" and thus resistance to treatment and analysis in general.[139] Rose's title, "the last resistance," comes directly from Freud's inventory of forms of resistance and anticathexis (repression, transference, gain from illness, etc.) in his addenda to "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety" (1926).[140] The "last [resistance] to be discovered," Freud writes, is "also the most obscure though not always the least powerful one."[141] The resistance of suicide draws its power from obscurity.

Throughout *The Suicide Archive*, I attempt to hold these different understandings of resistance—as political opposition, as repression of the unconscious, as obstacle to analysis and recovery, as refusal of cure—in tension. They are ultimately all "political," however, insofar as each deals with the relation of suicide to structures of power or to the language of power.

On "Suicide Archives"

If "suicide" and "resistance" form the conceptual pillars organizing this study, then "archive" names its method and fundamental challenge. As the trial of Azor demonstrates, the relation of suicide to the scriptural-imperial archive is complex. The legibility of suicide as resistance is never certain. In the archive

of slavery and colonization, suicide appears under erasure or in highly overdetermined frames.

The evidential and existential uncertainty of suicide's status within traditional archives compounds the challenges of writing about death and dispossession under slavery and colonization more generally. Scholars in fields such as Black Atlantic studies and slavery and freedom studies have engaged directly with how the archival turn in twentieth-century Americanist historicism often translates to "a desire [. . .] to recover black subjects from archives structured by violence and dispossession" and the attendant challenges, pitfalls, and problems "recovery" poses.[142] They have pointed to the ways in which the task of recovery, though "fundamental to historical writing and research," is impossible when it comes to archives built on exclusion and occlusion.[143]

We find versions of this thesis—about the impossibility/necessity of recovery, about the violence of the archive—in works across various subdisciplines, but its formulation in recent feminist scholarship is most powerful and especially salient here. For Saidiya Hartman in "Venus in Two Acts" (2008), a text I return to throughout this book, the archive is "a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property."[144] For Marisa Fuentes in *Dispossessed Lives* (2016), "violence is transferred from the enslaved bodies to the documents that count, condemn, assess, and evoke them."[145] For Jennifer Morgan in *Reckoning with Slavery* (2021), "archives make it impossible to receive African women as other than historically obscure, damaged, and violated."[146] In *Ordinary Notes* (2023), as part of her preliminary dictionary of untranslatable Blackness, Christina Sharpe dedicates "Note 176," an entry by Dionne Brand, to the term *archive*, defined as "a compendium, usually fissured, listings of events, *seams from which Black life must be extracted, extrapolated*."[147]

Despite the violence of the archive and the impossibility of redress, recovery appeals to our sensibilities as scholars and humans. Best parses this critical impulse—really a longing and projection—as follows:

> No one wants to be erased from history. . . . Obliterated. Snuffed out. And most scholars of slavery are drawn into the vortex of lives lost in the very moment in which they are found, quite in earnest, out of a longing to bear witness to violent extermination and in the hope that such witness may occasion compassionate resuscitation.[148]

Best's assertion—"No one wants to be erased from history"—would seem justification enough for such "earnest" efforts to recover lives lost, indeed for a whole model of doing history: I would not want to be erased, forgotten, obliterated, *so let me find you*.

Where does that leave us in cases of self-erasure, self-disappearance, self-obliteration, self-liquidation? What about the resistance of invisibility and anonymity? What does it mean to find someone who did not want to be found, who wanted to remain lost? There is a real—unresolved—ambivalence throughout *The Suicide Archive* regarding how to write about the lives and deaths of people who, for reasons unknowable, desired to no longer exist: how to handle the traces of people who perhaps only wanted to disappear and can no longer answer for themselves.

WHILE MY READING-WRITING praxis is in sustained dialogue with Spivak, especially her analysis of female subaltern suicide in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988)—as well as in later essays[149]—the title of this book takes direct inspiration from and seeks to expand Suman Gupta's notion of a "suicide archive." In *Usurping Suicide* (2017), Gupta defines the "suicide archive" as an aggregate of official or unofficial "suicide texts" pertaining to a specific case of suicide. In Gupta's formulation, the suicide archive is a "fluid," open-ended formation encompassing "explicit statements by the person committing suicide (such as a suicide note), the manner and setting of its performance (in public or private, as spectacle or ritual, etc.), the testimonials of witnesses," as well as "records for public purposes, such as reports and media accounts, and findings and assessments by various investigators (for the legal record, for news reportage, etc.)."[150] A suicide archive incorporates "possible linkages and framings that may already be publicly anticipated" between a suicide and its context—what Gupta calls "pressing social concerns"—and between one suicide and another.[151]

The literary is missing from this list and from Gupta's initial definition of "suicide archive," thereby omitting recourse, in suicide's wake, to the aesthetic—as well as the possibility of reading the act itself, and not merely the texts it gives rise to, *literarily*. For all its insights, *Usurping Suicide* reaffirms the critical borders of suicide studies, focusing on highly public, widely reported suicides, predominantly from Europe and the Global North. The only "African" example in the wider study is the much-discussed suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi, the twenty-six-year-old street vendor who set himself on fire in front of the governor's office in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, on 17 December 2010, and whose self-immolation is regarded as the "spark" that set off the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia as well as a series of uprisings across North Africa and the Middle East, often called the "Arab Spring."[152]

The Suicide Archive charts a different course and proposes an alternative history of resistance to French empire by (1) taking seriously the fundamen-

tally literary and dysgraphic dimensions of suicide archives as fungible, surreptitious textual formations; and (2) foregrounding the capacity of aesthetic works to function as "anarchives" (Lia Brozgal) or "other-archives" (Brahim El Guabli) of suicidal resistance in their own right, that is, as *suicide archives*.[153] My book turns to the singular affordance of the aesthetic, which I argue provides ways forward for thinking about suicide—and about the kinds of problems it poses for history, interpretation, and memory—that trouble easy binarisms of resistance and oppression, martyrdom and nihilism. Aesthetic forms lay bare the terrible tensions and tragic paradoxes that characterize suicidal resistance.

Structure and Itinerary

The Suicide Archive begins in the eighteenth century in the French Atlantic world and ends in the present day in North and West Africa. Each chapter bears witness to how people have actively, vehemently, and violently resisted their enslavement, colonization, and settler occupation from the dawn of French colonial expansion to the present. I pay particular attention to histories of female suicidal resistance, which historically have been less available to collective historical consciousness and even more coercively framed in the colonial archive. Many of the aesthetic works discussed in *The Suicide Archive* centrally represent female suicide, and it seems important to point out this fact as a feature not only of this book but of aesthetic representations of suicide more generally. There is a long literary genealogy of female suicides—most often authored by men—from Dido, Antigone, and Cleopatra to Ophelia to Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary. In the nineteenth century, as Margaret Higonnet writes, "women's suicide becomes a cultural obsession."[154] This extends to more recent theoretical reflections on suicide and/as resistance: Spivak's inaugural reading-writing of suicide in "Can the Subaltern Speak" is a post-factum reading of *female* suicide. The "impossible message" that her essay makes legible is inscribed in the death of the young Indian woman Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, who hanged herself in her father's apartment in North Calcutta to avoid having to participate in a political assassination. She had waited until she was menstruating to preempt the charge that she knew would inevitably be ascribed to her hanged, female-gendered body: an illicit pregnancy. The obsession with women's suicide carries over to contemporary debates around the figure of the female suicide bomber and the role of women as agents of political violence, topics I return to in my final chapter.

All this is to say that I attempt to constellate concerns of race, gender, and social status in my readings of individual works and in my discussions of the

interrelation between suicidal resistance and systemic violence. Put another way, suicide, in my reading, is always "political," even in its most private and personal iterations. On some level, it is always a refusal of the world as it is currently structured. Reading suicide, attending to the act's rhetorical force, requires an acknowledgment of the ways in which suicides also become records of rampant social inequality and injustice, especially with respect to race- and gender-based violence in colonial and ostensibly postcolonial contexts.

The five chapters of *The Suicide Archive* cover broad terrain, effectively retracing the historical and geographic contours of the French Atlantic Triangle in reverse and revisiting the sites of some of the most intense episodes of French colonizing violence. They also cover key moments in the history of French empire and thus different imperial and neo-imperial formations. Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the period of French slavery and its abolitions (roughly the late seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century), examining collective antislavery suicides on the Caribbean and African sides of the Atlantic Triangle. Chapter 3 occurs at a flex point, focusing on the decade leading up to and immediately following Senegalese Independence (1960). This chapter opens up *The Suicide Archive* to a more diasporic framework, to transhistorical links, global networks, and South–North migratory routes, all while remaining profoundly haunted by the Middle Passage and antislavery suicide. It marks a further transition toward a focus, in the back half of this book, on individual suicide, political protest, and suicide in Independence and post-Independence struggles on the continent. In chapter 4, the backdrop is Algeria during the outright anticolonial war of the 1950s and 1960s, then the civil war and state violence of the 1990s. In chapter 5, the setting is Morocco during the post-9/11 era and the war on terror.

Across these chapters, the "shadows" of slave suicide and of anti-Black violence loom large. The transatlantic and trans-Saharan slave trades continue to haunt West and North Africa not only as metaphor but also as historical effect and affect.[155] Colonial techniques of corporal punishment, forced labor, and imprisonment introduced under slavery directly informed France's colonial policies throughout Africa, the Indian Ocean, and Asia after abolition and later were adopted and transformed by postcolonial regimes. This genealogy of violence is perhaps most evident in the origins of the Code de l'Indigénat (the Native Code)—implemented first in Algeria in 1881 before being extended to all of France's colonies and aspects of which remained in place until after Independence—in the text of the Code Noir.

The five chapters of *The Suicide Archive* also span important shifts in French legal history: suicide was decriminalized in the Code Pénal of 1791, the Napoleonic Code Civil of 1804, and the Code Pénal of 1810 but remained a pun-

ishable offense under slavery. This fact reflects the different and inferior legal status ascribed to the enslaved under the various iterations of the Code Noir (1685) in place until the abolition of 1848, and later to colonized subjects under the Code de l'Indigénat (introduced in 1881 and abolished between 1944 and 1947).

Despite its loosely chronological structure, precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial texts are juxtaposed throughout *The Suicide Archive*. Part of the argument of this book is that suicide scrambles conventions of chronology and historiography in formative ways. Each of the individual timelines, historical moments, and locales explored in this book is entangled with others: the past surges up in the present, colony bleeds into postcolony, "Africa" makes itself known and felt in France, the Atlantic and Mediterranean haunt and shadow one another.[156] In this focus on entanglement and intersection—connections, crossings, and hauntings—*The Suicide Archive* draws on recent contextual approaches to imperial history and memory such as *histoire croisée* or "crossed history" (Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmerman); "multidirectional" and "knotted" memory (Michael Rothberg); "entangled history" (Gregor Feindt); "history hesitant" (Lisa Lowe); and "potential history" (Ariella Aïsha Azoulay).[157] Lowe's mobilization of "hesitation" as archival method and Azoulay's notion of "potential history" are especially resonant with the project of *The Suicide Archive*. The former marks an attempt, as Lowe writes, to "provide a space, a different temporality [. . .] [to] reckon with the connections that could have been but were lost and are thus not yet—before we conceive the freedoms yet to come."[158] The latter cautions us against the progressive impulse to consign violence to a colonial past in the name of a decolonized future, urging us instead toward "a form of being with others, both living and dead, across time, against the separation of the past from the present," toward an undisciplined history focused on activating and amplifying dormant possibilities.[159] The suicide archive provides this different temporality, this space of reckoning.

Taken together, the five chapters of this study articulate a far-ranging genealogy of suicidal resistance that unsettles imperial cartographies by connecting Atlantic, sub-Saharan, Maghrebi, and French geographies and temporalities. Each chapter may stand on its own and might be read independently of others, but chapters benefit most from being read within this broader architecture, which begins and ends with suicide bombs, positioning suicide under slavery and suicide terrorism as two poles, challenging us to think about resistance in different, often unsettling, ways. The chapters of *The Suicide Archive* effectively alternate between two dominant modes or settings of suicide and their attendant images: fire (ashes, explosions, burning) and water (oceans, rivers,

drowning). This allows for connections to be drawn across texts but also between lexicons—from Azor's death by firearm (*il s'est brûlé la cervelle*, literally "he burned his head") to the trajectories of the *harragas* who "burn" the sea. It reflects the ways suicide archives travel in unpredictable and unsettling ways. Across the book, "suicide" itself is revealed to be a highly unstable category. It emerges, variously, as a response to different kinds of unfreedom; to enslavement, colonial oppression, and occupation; to experiences of migration, alienation, and displacement; to racism, psychological abuse, and trauma; to incredible structural and state violence; to rampant inequality; and as the expression of a desire to be closer to God, to reach "paradise." It is carried out individually and collectively, in ways both private and public.

CHAPTER 1, "CHORAL HISTORIES," explores the interplay between memory and resistance in literary texts that creatively mine and transform a silenced history of slave suicide in the French Atlantic world. Building on my analysis of the paradoxes of suicide under French slavery made legible by the trial of Azor, I read Fabienne Kanor's fugue-like text *Humus* (2006) and Daniel Maximin's quasi-epistolary novel *L'isolé soleil* (1981) together, showing how both works find creative forms for histories of suicide that fall out of frame in historiographical accounts of French slavery or are obscured in national narratives of resistance and emancipation. Kanor and Maximin decenter and regender masculinist narratives by magnifying the real and imagined archival traces of enslaved women in their literary rewritings of collective suicide.

Whereas Kanor takes up a virtually unknown episode of collective female suicide under French slavery, Maximin's novel topples the famous "epic" of the collective suicide of Louis Delgrès and his followers in order to bear witness to less visible, more "secret" histories of suicidal resistance. Their literary texts crack open monumentalized accounts of slavery, clearing space for more complicated forms of resistance to surface and other voices to be heard. In my conclusion to this chapter, I turn to contemporary debates around historical memory, showing how Kanor's and Maximin's novels participate in important, ongoing conversations about commemorating the history of slavery and abolition.

Chapter 2, "Oral Archives," maintains focus on suicide as a response to capture and enslavement but turns to the African "side" of the French Atlantic Triangle, examining the oral history and translingual literary responses surrounding a national tragedy in Senegalese history that is almost unknown outside Senegal. The Talaatay Nder, or "Tuesday of Nder," refers to a collective suicide at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when an entire village of

women and children self-immolated to escape enslavement. The Talaatay Nder reveals some of the complexities of French colonization in West Africa and the challenges of studying slave systems in isolation: the raid and razing of Nder by North African raiders were indirectly provoked by French encroachments in the region. Moreover, they occurred in the immediate wake of the official abolition of the transatlantic (but not trans-Saharan) slave trade (1818) in France, when a clandestine Atlantic trade remained active and while France continued to support and maintain local forms of slavery throughout the Sahara-Sahel region.

Reading across languages and archives, I reconstruct the history of the women of Nder's suicidal resistance and trace its multiple entextualizations. I examine how Senegalese writers have represented and repurposed the Talaatay Nder narrative in literature through readings of Alioune Badara Bèye's French-language historical tragedy *Nder en flammes* (1988) and Boubacar Boris Diop's first Wolof-language novel, *Doomi Golo: Nettali* (2003), a complex example of African "world literature." In these texts, the antislavery suicides of the women of Nder become hymnals of female resistance and expressions of feminist nationalisms. I conclude this chapter by considering another "afterlife" of the Talaatay Nder in Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's novel *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (2021), which connects the women's self-immolation to fire protests that spread throughout Senegal in the wake of Bouazizi's self-burning in Tunisia.

Chapter 3, "Screen Memories," uses the oral archive of the Talaatay Nder unearthed in the preceding chapter and the metaphorics of slave suicide explored in chapter 1 to reread perhaps the most iconic suicide in Francophone African cinema and literature: that of Diouana, the protagonist of Ousmane Sembène's short story "La Noire de . . ." (1962) and its eponymous film adaptation, *La Noire de . . .* (1966) / *Black Girl* (2017). Considered in the wake of the resistance of Nder, Diouana's suicide more clearly rehearses and reactivates local histories of suicidal resistance to oppression and exile. It resonates with a transatlantic genealogy of antislavery suicide as well as with many suicidal migration narratives—from Ousmane Socé Diop's *Mirages de Paris* (1937) to Fatou Diome's *Le ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003) to Khalid Lyamlahy's *Évocation d'un mémorial à Venise* (2023).

This chapter examines the myriad forms of "screening" that have characterized Diouana's story from the 1950s to the present. Drawing on Freud's notion of a "screen memory," a visual memory that covers or conceals another, I revisit the meanings of "resistance" as repression and opposition to recovery or analysis—themes explored further in the following chapter. As the cartographic and chronological boundaries of *The Suicide Archive* gradually expand and multiply, more supple interpretative frames become necessary. To this end,

chapters 3 and 4 collectively elaborate a critical lexicon grounded in visual grammars, forms of exposure and spectacle, and the camera image as heuristics for activating layered histories of suicidal resistance.

Chapter 4, "Multiple Exposures," extends the theoretical frames for representing female suicide developed in earlier chapters and for considering the relationship between memory and resistance. Focusing on the work of the Constantine-born writer Nourredine Saadi (1944–2017), I lay out a history of Algerian suicide in the *longue durée*. I build on earlier discussions, in chapters 1 and 3, of the Atlantic as a watery burial ground or "seametary" (Hakim Abderrezak) in the works of writers like Kanor, Diome, and Sembène to establish a genealogy of suicidal resistance centered on Constantine's defining geological feature, the Rhummel River Gorge, which I show to be a fluvial geography of tragedy and terror, peopled by the ghosts of drowned women.

Taking cues from how images, especially photographs, circulate in Saadi's work, I develop a literary hermeneutic informed by photographic techniques of exposure as a means of accessing sedimented histories of loss. Through the notion of *multiple exposure*, I argue for an associative poetics of superimposition that supplies more supple "frames" for thinking French colonial history and suicide together. I focus on twin novels by Nourredine Saadi, *La nuit des origines* (2005) and *Boulevard de l'abîme* (2017). Both are set between Constantine and Paris, but their timelines and geographies constantly fold back on themselves, moving between the civil war of the 1990s, the Algerian War for Independence decades earlier, and the colonial and precolonial periods. Like Sembène's Diouana and Diome's Salie, the female protagonist of these novels, Abla, finds herself in exile in France—simultaneously longing and unable or unwilling to return home. Her suicide, like Diouana's, is heavily mediated—recounted as a long flashback through the narrative frame of a police investigation or *enquête*. In the wake of Diouana's suicide, we are better positioned to read Abla's suicide as a moment of colonial memory coming to crisis.

Chapter 5, "Strange Bedfellows," forms an unsettling coda to my reflections on the relationship between suicide, archive, resistance, violence, history, and aesthetics. Focusing on suicide terrorism, this chapter shows how literature and literary criticism supply other discursive forms for theorizing contemporary violence. Aesthetic works articulate different modes of understanding and open up conceptual possibilities where official discourses meet the limit of suicide bombing, laying out hermeneutical and ethical alternatives by way of fiction.

My reading focuses on Mahi Binebine's novel about the 2003 Casablanca suicide bombings, *Les étoiles de Sidi Moumen* (2010). Binebine's novel creates a bridge from previous chapters since he explicitly connects the situation of the

suicide bomber to the history of terrorism in Algeria during the Black Decade and to the trajectories of sub-Saharan and North African migrants or *harraga*, who risk everything to reach foreign shores. This discussion of the relationship between irregular migration, on the one hand, and suicide bombing, on the other, is enriched by turning to one of Binebine's earlier novels, *Cannibales* (1999), which shares formal and thematic concerns with *Les étoiles de Sidi Moumen*. Binebine's exploration of suicide bombing is noteworthy both for its innovative narrative frame—the novel is narrated by a dead terrorist—and for its queering of the terrorist fiction genre. Through its ghostly narration and "queer form," Binebine's novel contests the idea that there is no mode, no adequate language, for understanding the suicide bomber. It unsettles the masculinist posturing most often associated with acts of suicide terrorism, making available a queer subtext that keeps focus on the oppressive postcolonial state.

My conclusion, "The Suicide Archive: A Social Document," returns to the questions of memory, meaning, and reckoning raised here in the introduction. I reflect on the role of archives and archiving in writing histories of loss and on the yield of reading aesthetic works as archives, especially amid ongoing debates about memorial approaches to colonial history and the status of African archives.

NOTES

PREFACE

1. Yaeger, "Consuming Trauma," 229.
2. Aranke, *Death's Futurity*, 6.
3. Brathwaite, "Jou'vert," 113.
4. Dominique Godineau suggests that by the end of the eighteenth century, political suicide was "a French specialty"; Godineau, *S'abréger les jours*, 291.
5. Terri Snyder makes a related historiographical claim about suicide in the British Atlantic; see Snyder, *Power to Die*.
6. Glissant, *Philosophie*, 19. The phrase appears originally in Glissant's formulation of "Tout-monde"; Glissant, *Une nouvelle région*, 96.
7. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 129.
8. Lee, *Ingenious Citizenship*, 191–244.
9. In French, *décalage* refers to a gap, lag, or misalignment in space, time, or both.
10. Conan and Rousso, *Vichy*.
11. Aranke, *Death's Futurity*, 15.
12. C. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 22.

INTRODUCTION

Epigraph: Dugoujon, *Lettres sur l'esclavage*, 88–89 (emphasis in original); also cited in Schœlcher, *Histoire de l'esclavage*, 461. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own. In certain cases (for instance, when transcribing archival documents, oral texts, or citing poetry), I provide the original citation and an English translation.

1. My recourse to the French colonial legal archive is inspired by Frédéric Régent's observation that, lacking first-person accounts of slavery by enslaved persons, scholars of French slavery might turn to legal proceedings to recover "fragmentary" access to the voices of the enslaved; Régent, "Figures d'esclaves," 111. See also Régent, Gonfier, and Maillard, *Libres et sans fers*. Régent's approach is reflected in recent work by Sophie

White, who focuses on how the voices of enslaved men and women emerge across the records of four court cases in eighteenth-century New Orleans; White, *Voices of the Enslaved*. Régent and White draw on court cases in which the enslaved testified and had their testimonies recorded. The cases of Azor and other suicides are particularly complex, given that suicides were tried posthumously; their "voices," if they appear at all, appear only as reported speech.

2. "Azor" and its near anagram "Zamor(e)" were "hugely popular," exotic names associated with French slavery. Evocative of the Azore Islands, "Azor" is the name of one of Olympe de Gouges's characters in *Zamore et Mirza* (1788) and *L'esclavage des noirs* (1792). See "Exotic Names Associated with Slavery," in Miller, *French Atlantic Triangle*, 145, 452n15.

3. ANOM, COL C7 A 61 f° 327. The judge Louis Butel de Montgai presided over the tribunal.

4. On the legal and social history of suicide in Ancien Régime metropolitan France, see Godineau, *S'abréger les jours*, especially the first chapter on postmortem trials, "Le cadavre devant ses juges," 17–84. For an overview of the criminalization of suicide in eighteenth-century France, see Merrick, "Patterns and Prosecution."

5. Godineau, *S'abréger les jours*, 36.

6. Godineau, *S'abréger les jours*, 7.

7. Godineau, *S'abréger les jours*, 7–8. The phrase used to describe Azor's suicide, *se brûler la cervelle*—like the expressions *se faire sauter le caisson* and *se faire sauter la cervelle*—probably entered usage in the mid- to late eighteenth century, based on expressions related to death by firearm (e.g., *je vous brûle la cervelle*).

8. Godineau, *S'abréger les jours*, 7–8, 17.

9. Godineau, *S'abréger les jours*, 7–8.

10. As Montesquieu writes in *Lettres persanes* (1721), "The laws in Europe are furious against those who kill themselves. We make them die, so to speak, a second time"; Montesquieu, "Lettre LXXVI," 167.

11. Originally published by Louis XIV, the Code Noir legally designated the enslaved as property. See Farley, "Apogee of the Commodity"; Sala-Molins, *Le Code Noir*.

12. This was also the case in the British Atlantic. See Snyder, "Power to Die or the Power of the State?," chap. 4 in *Power to Die*, 82–100.

13. The natural disasters included, in Guadeloupe, the earthquake of 1843 and a fire in Pointe-à-Pitre in 1871; and in Martinique, a fire in Fort-de-France in 1890 and the eruption of Mount Pelée in 1902. Church, "Last Resort," 513.

14. "Registre des naissances et décès des esclaves, Pointe-à-Pitre, 7 octobre 1804 au 22 septembre 1805" (ADG, Series 1 E 35/95). Most of the deaths recorded are of enslaved men and women in their teens and early twenties, some are children as young as ten and four years old.

15. In his *Essai sur le suicide en Afrique noire*, Jean Marius Raynaud highlights the decalage between official reports and the widespread reality of suicide within slavery, pinpointing an ambiguity in Schœlcher's inventory of suicides in Martinique over a six-month period: "8 slaves [*noirs*] killed themselves, *or more exactly the colonial civil authorities recorded 8 suicides*." Raynaud's monograph exists in manuscript form (ANOM, 2 ECOL 21). On the "problem" of evaluating sources and statistics related to suicide within slavery,

see Snyder, "Problem of Suicide in North American Slavery," in *Power to Die*, 7–22. See also Lester, "Suicidal Behavior."

16. The most famous case of such an insurance policy at work is the massacre of captive Africans aboard the British slave ship *Zong*. This is the subject of Fred D'Aguiar's novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1998) and Marlene NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008). On the *Zong* massacre, see Baucom, "Specters of the Atlantic." See also Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, especially chap. 3, "'Madam Death! Madam Death!': Credit, Insurance, and the Atlantic Cycle of Capital Accumulation," 80–112.

17. Émérigon, *Traité des assurances*, 394 (emphasis in original).

18. Church, "Last Resort," 531.

19. Raynaud, *Essai*, 32.

20. De Mackau, *Compte-rendu*, 32–33.

21. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*; Memmi, *Colonizer and the Colonized*, 146; Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 120.

22. For an overview, see Klonsky et al., "Ideation-to-Action Theories of Suicide."

23. Godineau, *S'abréger les jours*, 149–65.

24. See the chapter titled "Les 'maladies des nègres'" in Dorlin, *La matrice de la race*.

25. The efficacy of the *supplice de la claie* to serve as a suicide deterrent and form of social control was a subject of public debate throughout the nineteenth century. Consider the following excerpt from the *Mercure*: "What purpose could the horrible spectacle of a cadaver being drawn and quartered [*traîné sur la claie*] serve? In order to have a salutary effect, in order to make suicides less frequent, it is not an inanimate body that should be dragged about on an instrument designed for criminals!"; "Du suicide," 269.

26. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 140–41, 143–44.

27. Godineau, *S'abréger les jours*, 58–59.

28. Mbembe, "Necropolitics." See also Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié*.

29. Harms, *Diligent*, 262.

30. Millet de la Girardière and Pierre Barse were condemned to be placed in an iron cage and suspended in stirrups above a sharpened blade. In the preface to *Se défendre*, Elsa Dorlin describes this specific torture scene; Dorlin, *Se défendre*, 5. In reality, Millet de la Girardière died by suicide in prison before he could be tortured, while Barse was "beaten and burned" alive. Their deaths are described in archival documents: "Barse, one of the leaders, was beaten and burned [*roué et brûlé*]. Another, Millet de la Girardière, who was supposed to suffer the same fate, killed himself in prison" (ANOM, COL C7 A57 f° 200). Oriol similarly notes, "On the evening of 6 October 1802, 23 white people were killed in Saint-Anne. Lacrosse demanded an investigation: 'it is acknowledged that two white men: Barsse [*sic*] and Millet de la Girardière, the latter 69 years old and crippled with debt, led a group of 80 slaves [*nègres*] [. . .] with the goal of pillaging and stealing.' Barsse was beaten and burned alive on the Place de la Victoire. De la Girardière was condemned to 'die in an iron cage, naked, straddling a sharpened blade, in the same square.' To escape this torture, he hanged himself in prison." See Oriol, *Les hommes célèbres*, 270. On Millet de la Girardière's suicide, see Lacour, *Histoire de la Guadeloupe*, 3:416–18.

31. Novels such as Beninese writer Olympe Bhêly-Quénum's *Un piège sans fin* (1960) and Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi's *La vie et demie* (1979) are a case in point. In

the former an indentured laborer is brutally beaten and publicly humiliated by a French colonial overseer in Bénin before killing himself; the latter opens with a gruesome torture scene at the hands of a fictitious African dictatorship in which the resistance fighter Martial refuses to die despite being disemboweled and essentially cut in half.

32. Bancel et al., *Zoos humains*.

33. See Niort, *Du Code Noir*.

34. The secondary literature on slave suicide is relatively limited and overwhelmingly Anglo-American in focus. Mention of suicide typically is anecdotal and subsumed under broader studies of Atlantic slavery (e.g., Mannix and Cowley, *Black Cargoes*, 19, 120). For analyses that systematically address suicide within slavery, see Snyder, *Power to Die*; Snyder, "Suicide, Slavery, and Memory"; Bell, "Slave Suicide"; Daniel Walker, "Suicidal Tendencies"; Hall, *Social Control*, 20–23; Piersen, "White Cannibals, Black Martyrs"; Stevenson, "Jumping Overboard." See also the section "Les actes de l'auto-destruction," in Yale, "La violence dans l'esclavage," 54–59. In a recent "state of the art" on resistance studies in France, the only mention of suicide appears in a citation from Schœlcher, where it is characterized as an infrequent and undesirable alternative to marronage; Le Glaunec, "Résister à l'esclavage," 22. During the nineteenth century, Schœlcher himself wrote at length about slave suicide, dedicating a chapter to the subject in *Histoire de l'esclavage* (1847); Schœlcher, *Histoire de l'esclavage*, 455–68. For a rare French study discussing suicide as a form of resistance, see Dorlin, "Les espaces-temps." In his article on marronage, Yvan Debbasch connects marronage and suicide as two forms of resistance and escape; Debbasch, "Le marronage," 1014.

35. In his *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l'Amérique* (1724), the Père Labat describes how the enslaved would consume dirt, ash, lime, and other non-food substances; Labat, *Nouveau voyage*, 151.

36. See Leti, "L'empoisonnement."

37. Consider Raynaud's comments on the frequency of suicide during the Middle Passage: "Their passions are violently repressed and their future closed off; thus discouraged, they kill themselves [*se suicident*]. From the beginning of the great period of the slave trade, authors observe this tendency to escape the cruelty of fate through death. The most common means of suicide is drowning. During their walks on deck, the enslaved [*les noirs*] throw themselves into the sea even if they are in the middle of the ocean with no chance of escaping by swimming"; Raynaud, *Essai*, 18. In *Les aventures d'un négrier* (1854), Théodore Canot similarly notes: "From the beginning [of the crossing], a palpable dissatisfaction was evident among the slaves. [. . .] A few days after our departure, one slave, in an excess of rage, leapt overboard and, during the night, another strangled himself to death. These two suicides in the span of twenty-four hours awakened serious concern in for the officers and lead me to make all necessary preparations in view of a possible revolt"; Canot, *Les aventures d'un négrier*, 134.

38. Savary, *Le parfait négociant*, 140.

39. Ho, *Esclavagisme et engagisme*.

40. We see this claim repeated in many eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century treatises on suicide. The medical interest in the suicide of French colonial subjects continued into the twentieth centuries. For instance, E. Jourdran and M. Fontoynont, medical

doctors in Tananarive, published their short study "Le suicide chez les malgaches" (ANOM, BIB SOM B 996) with the goal of demonstrating "the reason for the majority of suicides, otherwise relatively infrequent among the Malagasy people, and to contribute in this small way to a study of the psychoses according to race and religion"; Jourdran and Fontoynont, "Le suicide chez les malgaches," 2. Until the late twentieth century, France's overseas departments such as Guadeloupe and Martinique were entirely ignored in global studies of suicide; André Morel points this out in his doctoral medical thesis, "Suicides et tentatives de suicide à la Martinique" (1979), which examines 37 suicides and 152 parasuicides in Martinique during the year 1976 (ANOM, BIB AOM TH 508). See also Petit, "Un suicide chez les noirs"; Collomb and Collignon, "Les conduits suicidaires."

41. Liengme, "Le suicide parmi les noirs."

42. Snyder, *Power to Die*, 37–40; see also Snyder, "Suicide, Slavery, and Memory," 41.

43. The committee published a report in 1847, titled "Testimonios del expediente formado par averiguar las causas que influyen en el frecuente suicidio de los esclavos"; cited in Hall, *Social Control*, 21.

44. Raynaud, *Essai*, 31. Corre notes the same phenomenon in his *Crime en pays créoles* (1889), providing data on the alarming suicide rates of Hindu immigrant workers in Maurice after abolition—at least 476 over a ten-year period; Corre, *Le crime en pays créoles*.

45. Schœlcher writes: "What terrible arguments assembled for the cause of abolition! Such numerous suicides, a direct, immediate consequence of slavery—are they not its most striking condemnation?"; Schœlcher, *Histoire de l'esclavage*, 466.

46. These were linked to racist theories of environmental determinism. See, for instance, Levacher, *Guide médical*, 241–45. The term *nosopolitique*, combining Foucault's biopolitics with the French *nosologie*, the branch of (colonial) medicine concerned with the classification of maladies, comes from Elsa Dorlin, who points out that such medical texts aimed at producing an "interested knowledge" concerning "the psychic or physical pathologies, conditions, and afflictions resulting from the social and, stricto sensu, political tensions such as poisoning, incapacitating mutilations, suicides, insanity. [. . .] *And this, primarily to preserve the interests of the slavery and the slave trade at its height*"; Dorlin, "Naissance de la race" (my emphasis).

47. Frossard, *La cause des esclaves*, 263.

48. Raynaud, *Essai*, 19.

49. An individual suicide risked creating an "epidemic" of suicidal behavior. Raynaud notes: "Sometimes, the punishment for the slave who attempts suicide is terrible, for the slave traders fear his companions will imitate him, they fear above all else collective suicides"; Raynaud, *Essai*, 19.

50. Frossard, *La cause des esclaves*, 263.

51. Paul Barret, a medical doctor in the French navy, describes this device: "They take the precaution to gag the victims destined for sacrifices, by means of a wooden cross, of which one of the bars goes into the mouth and pushes hard down onto the tongue to prevent it from folding back on itself"; Barret, *L'Afrique occidentale*, 147.

52. Snyder, *Power to Die*, 37–40.

53. On the "irony" of suicide prevention within slavery, see Snyder, *Power to Die*, 37–40. In "Necropolitics," Mbembe writes: "The slave is therefore kept alive but in a

state of injury, in a phantomlike world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity"; Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 21.

54. Wiredu, "Death and the Afterlife," 141.

55. Europeans leveraged the claim that certain Africans were inclined to suicide due to spiritual beliefs, cultural values, or ethnic "predispositions" to divorce suicide from the violence of enslavement. In his response to the Abbé Grégoire's *De la littérature des nègres* (1808), for instance, the planter François Richard de Tussac writes that, since enslaved Africans "believe in resurrection, they think that in killing themselves it is a means to return to their country. It is therefore not [. . .] mistreatment by their masters that leads them to this"; De Tussac, *Cri des colons*, 133. On this tendency in Anglo-American texts, see Snyder, *Power to Die*, 12–13. Harms similarly notes that the Fon of Dahomey were "thought likely to become depressed in captivity and commit suicide"; Harms, *Diligent*, 161.

56. See Commander, *Afro-Atlantic Flight*.

57. On Ebos landing, see Snyder, *Power to Die*, 161–66. On the flying African, see Young, "All God's Children Had Wings"; Powell, "Summoning the Ancestors," 259–62; Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 117–18. In *Sartorius*, Glissant connects the collective suicide of the Batoutos to Nigerian captives; Glissant, *Sartorius*, 50.

58. Nahli Allison, "Revisiting the Legend." The imagery of the flying African, and thus the specter of slave suicide, has a long afterlife in African American culture, evoked in mainstream visual art and performances such as Beyoncé's *Love Drought* (2016).

59. Newton writes, "By hoping and desiring, the revolutionary suicide chooses life; he is, in the words of Nietzsche, 'an arrow of longing for another shore.' Both suicides despise tyranny, but the revolutionary suicide is both a great despiser and a great adorer who longs for another shore"; Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 371.

60. Senghor, *Négritude et humanisme*, 77–78.

61. Parasucide refers to a range of self-harm behaviors, including passive suicide, that may or may not be intended to result in death.

62. Harms describes an example of this aboard the *Excellent*, when some enslaved men and women profited from the confusion generated by a revolt to leap overboard: "Revolt and suicide—two ways to escape captivity—seemed to go hand in hand"; Harms, *Diligent*, 270.

63. Among the suicides in Martinique cited by Raynaud—many of which are cited in Schœlcher—we find the following: a leather strap, a cord made from strips of cloth torn from the suicide's shirt, a shard of glass, a sash from the suicide's skirts. See Raynaud, *Essai*, 16–17; Schœlcher, *Histoire de l'esclavage*, 455–68.

64. Schœlcher lists numerous cases of enslaved men and women, some as young as 15, who died by suicide in Martinique between 4 February and 12 July 1845, almost immediately after enduring severe corporal punishments or being threatened by their enslavers; Schœlcher, *Histoire de l'esclavage*, 455–68.

65. Drawing on data from the Dugoujon and Schœlcher, Rayndaud notes several instances of captured enslaved men who died by suicide in the jail cells in which they were detained before they could be tried or returned to the plantation; Raynaud, *Essai*, 26–27. A series of letters from July 1752 between Antoine Philippe Le Moyne and Gilbert

Guillouet d'Orvilliers (ANOM, COL C14 22 f° 60 and f° 165) recount similar scenarios in the context of slavery in French Guyana.

66. Régent et al., *Libres et sans fers*, 251–52, 359–60.

67. This is the image with which Snyder opens her historical study of suicide under slavery in British North America. Snyder, *Power to Die*, 1–3; see also Torrey, *Portraiture*, 42.

68. See Brown, *Art of Suicide*.

69. I am inflecting Hartman's concept of a "scene of subjection"; see Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*. In a study of Renaissance "self-finishing," Drew Daniel evokes the notion of "self-finishing" in relation to Hartman's "scene" and "self-fashioning"; Daniel, *Joy of the Worm*, 1.

70. Schœlcher writes, "In accomplishing his suicide [*son acte de désespoir*], could this slave have wanted, beneath the very eyes of the leader of the colony, prove that the daily torture of slavery is less tolerable than death? Could he have wanted to protest, in this cruel manner, against the reports of the governors and public prosecutors, who paint a pretty picture of servitude?"; Schœlcher, *Histoire de l'esclavage*, 456.

71. Métral, *Histoire de l'expédition des Français*, 18.

72. Schœlcher lists several cases of apparent suicides and unexplained deaths in which the bodies of enslaved men and women were found in various states of decay but with no apparent signs of violence or clear evidence of the precise means of death. Schœlcher, *Histoire de l'esclavage*, 462–63. Snyder describes the "suicide-like behaviors" of enslaved men and women who were "found dead" after exposing themselves to the elements or starvation and others who "appear to have courted or sought death quite deliberately"; Snyder, *Power to Die*, 19.

73. Snyder, *Power to Die*, 18–19.

74. Schœlcher, *Histoire de l'esclavage*, 466 (emphasis in original).

75. See Woywodt and Kiss, "Geophagia."

76. See chap. 3, "Incorrigible Dirt Eaters," and chap. 4, "Of Paper Trails and Dirt Eaters," in Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness*.

77. Dodman, *What Nostalgia Was*, 91.

78. Labat, *Nouveau voyage*, 151.

79. Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*; Wilderson, *Afropessimism*.

80. Snyder, "Suicide, Slavery, and Memory," 50–51.

81. Levacher, *Guide médical*, 184.

82. Levacher, *Guide médical*, 96.

83. Lagercrantz, *Geophagical Customs*, 63.

84. Debret, *Voyage pittoresque*, 47.

85. Debret, *Voyage pittoresque*, 47.

86. Snyder, *Power to Die*, 17. On the concept of "slave suicide ecology," see Snyder, "Suicide, Slavery, and Memory," 42, 53–59.

87. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

88. Writing about slavery in British North America, Richard Bell asks: "Was a slave's suicide an act of principled, yet costly, resistance to tyranny that challenged the hypocrisy of the revolutionary settlement? Or was it a measure of abject victimhood that begged for humanitarian intervention?"; Bell, "Slave Suicide," 526.

89. See Miller, *French Atlantic Triangle*, 33–39.

90. Miller writes, "*There are no real slave narratives in French*—not as we know them in the Anglophone Atlantic, not that have yet been discovered. That absence, for now at least, haunts any inquiry into the history of slavery"; Miller, *French Atlantic Triangle*, 34. There also exist important Arabic-language sources, namely the texts of Omar ibn Said (1770–1864), a Fula Islamic scholar from Futa Toro in present-day Senegal, who wrote several texts in Arabic, including an autobiography, while enslaved in the United States.

91. Church, "Last Resort."

92. Sala-Molins, *Le Code Noir*, 209, cited in Miller, *French Atlantic Triangle*, 35. See also Little, "Pirouettes sur l'abîme."

93. Miller, *French Atlantic Triangle*, 34 (emphasis in original). On the status of the slave narrative as a privileged genre in Black Atlantic history and African diaspora studies, see Jensen, *Beyond the Slave Narrative*.

94. Church, "Last Resort," 514.

95. Snyder, *Power to Die*, 16.

96. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 69.

97. Voltaire's *Candide* is a well-known example. Although better known for the episode involving the mutilation of the "slave of Surinam" according to punishments prescribed by the Code Noir, the narrative of North African slavery traced by La Vieille ends with a reflection on suicide.

98. Mailhol, *Le philosophe nègre*, 13–14, 39 (my emphasis).

99. See O'Connell, "Victor Séjour."

100. Hacking, "Making Up People," 234.

101. Hacking, "Making Up People," 235. Durkheim's sociological taxonomy of suicide remains a touchstone for broad-scale analyses of suicide. On a recent reevaluation of Durkheim, see Borlandi and Chakaoui, *Le suicide*.

102. Durkheim, *Le suicide*, 311.

103. Durkheim, *Le suicide*, 311.

104. Durkheim, *Le suicide*, 259.

105. Waters, *Suicide Voices*.

106. Jean Pierre Le Glaunec notes: "If you look closely, the topic of 'resistance' does not occupy the 'proper place' it deserves in French historiography. [. . .] While the question has not ceased to be studied in Anglo-Saxon historiography since the 1960s [. . .], one is struck by the rarity of works in France"; Le Glaunec, "Résister à l'esclavage," 16.

107. Daniel, *Joy of the Worm*, 7.

108. Kasahara-Kiritani et al., "Reading and Watching Films."

109. Spivak, "Rethinking Comparativism," 615.

110. Palmer, "Otherwise than Blackness," 260.

111. See Best, *None like Us*, especially his first chapter, "My Beautiful Elimination," 29–62. As Cedric Robinson, writing about the same tradition, puts it, by turning violence "inward" and defining "the terms of their destruction," Black rebels "lived on their terms, they died on their terms, they obtained freedom on their terms," rejecting "actual being" for "historical being"; Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 168–71.

112. Best, *None like Us*, 94.

113. Best, *None like Us*, 94, 26.
114. Best, *None like Us*, 95.
115. Fasolt, *Limits of History*.
116. Best, *None like Us*, 95 (emphasis in original).
117. On the "unshareability" of suicide, see Goh, "Shared Unshareability."
118. Jackson, *African Novel of Ideas*, 145–80.
119. Jackson, *African Novel of Ideas*, 147.
120. Jackson, *African Novel of Ideas*, 149.
121. Newell, "From Corpse to Corpus," 392.
122. Silverstein, "Texts, Entextualized and Artifactualized," 56.
123. Newell, "From Corpse to Corpus," 392.
124. Azim, *Colonial Rise of the Novel*, 7.
125. Jackson, *African Novel of Ideas*, 17; Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 261.
126. Forter, "Atlantic and Other Worlds," 1329.
127. D. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*.
128. On "necroresistance," see Bargu, *Starve and Immolate*. The notion of the (im)possibilities of "subaltern speech" emerges in dialogue with Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"
129. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 95.
130. Foucault, "Interview," 12.
131. This is the kind of voyeuristic literary access that a text like the late Édouard Levé's *Suicide* (2008) promises—a novel doubling as its author's public suicide note.
132. J. C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*. See also J. C. Scott, *Domination*.
133. Best, *None like Us*, 123.
134. Best, *None like Us*, 123.
135. Edwards, "Taste of the Archive," 970.
136. McLaughlin, "Resistance."
137. Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety," 159.
138. Rose, *Last Resistance*, 21.
139. Rose, *Last Resistance*, 24.
140. Rose, *Last Resistance*, 31; Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety," 157–60.
141. Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety,"160.
142. Helton et al., "Question of Recovery," 1. See also Coats and Dippold, "Beyond Recovery."
143. Helton et al., "Question of Recovery," 1.
144. Hartman, "Venus," 2.
145. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 5.
146. J. L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 9.
147. C. Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 251 (my emphasis).
148. Best, *None like Us*, 15.
149. See, for instance, Spivak, "Scattered Speculations," "Rethinking Comparativism," and "Terror."
150. Gupta et al., *Usurping Suicide*, 9–10.
151. Gupta et al., *Usurping Suicide*, 10.
152. Gupta et al., *Usurping Suicide*, 54–109.

153. On "anarchives," see Brozgal, *Absent the Archive*. On "other-archives," see El Guabli, *Moroccan Other-Archives*.

154. Higonnet, "Suicide," 103.

155. L. T. Murphy, *Metaphor and the Slave Trade*.

156. Dominic Thomas suggests that studies of belonging and memory in the wake of French empire have no other choice but to "journey across the arbitrary lines of demarcation that distinguish the colony from the postcolony and the colonial from the postcolonial period"; D. Thomas, *Black France*, 2.

157. Werner and Zimmermann, "Beyond Comparison"; Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*; Rothberg, "Introduction: Between Memory and Memory"; Feindt et al., "Entangled Memory"; Lowe, "History Hesitant"; Azoulay, *Potential History*.

158. Lowe, "History Hesitant," 98.

159. Azoulay, *Potential History*, 20, 43.

1. CHORAL HISTORIES

A section of this chapter is significantly revised from a previous publication, "A Fugue for the Middle Passage? Suicidal Resistance Takes Flight in Fabienne Kanor's *Humus* (2006)," *French Review* 95, no. 2 (December 2021): 127–44, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/839848.

My subhead "Forgetting Delgrès" nods to Laurent Dubois's essay "Haunting Delgrès," which inspires my reflections on historical memory related to Delgrès and French slavery here. See also Dubois, *Colony of Citizens*, especially chap. 12, "The Road to Matouba," 317–23, and chap. 15, "Vivre libre ou mourir!," 374–401, on Delgrès.

Epigraphs: Day and Bicknell, *The Dying Negro*, 1; Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 5–6.

1. Nantes was the most active French city involved in the transatlantic slave trade, with 1,754 expeditions recorded between 1688 and 1830; Hourcade, "Commemorating a Guilty Past," 124. See also Pétré-Grenouilleau, *Nantes et la traite négrière*; G. Martin, *L'ère des négriers*.

2. The ship's expeditions are documented in Mettas and Martin. The transcription of Captain Mosnier's surname varies (Mosnier, Monnier), as does that of the ship's owner (Larralde, Larralda). See Mettas, *Répertoire*, 563, 574–75; G. Martin, *L'ère des négriers*, 92–93, 114; G. Martin, *Négriers et bois d'ébène*, 81.

3. Louis Mosnier is mentioned in a maritime register from 1764 (ADLA C 1401 f°23 n°24), where he is listed as being fifty-two years old, suggesting he was in his early sixties at the time of the 1773/74 voyage.

4. On the role of sharks in the transatlantic slave trade, see Rediker, "History from Below the Water Line."

5. Kanor, *Humus* (2006), translated into English under the same title (2020); Maximin, *L'isolé soleil*. Before the publication of *Humus*, Kanor adapted the text for the theatrical performances *Homo humus est* and *La grande chambre*, staged with two actors performing passages from the characters "L'amazone" and "La muette" set to music; see Herbeck, "Entretien," 968.

6. Solitude was a female resistance fighter who continued to battle French troops after the collective suicide of Delgrès and his followers at Matouba, before being imprisoned