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HISTORY AT LARGE

A French Ellis Island? Museums, Memory and History in France and the United States

by Nancy L. Green

Can a museum save the suburbs? When the poor neighbourhoods of the French *banlieues*, peopled by immigrants and their children (French-born, French citizens), erupted in riots in November 2005, the planners of the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration (CNHI), could well ask the question. If one of the purposes of the projected national museum of immigration history is to solidify the social contract, or, as the Minister of Culture Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres said recently, to play 'un rôle de tout premier plan . . . pour maintenir et faire vivre le pacte qui unit nos concitoyens entre eux', this may be a tall order.¹ Besides the political agenda behind the project, to which I will return, the pertinent question for historians seems to be why now? After two centuries of immigration to France, three decades of historiography on the subject and twenty years of museum projects, at a time when the impoverished suburbs have erupted, when the *sans-papiers* (undocumented immigrants) continue to make headline news and when debates over history and memory and France's colonial past have surged, why have the French decided to commemorate their immigrant ancestors now? More generally, why do questions of memory arise at certain moments and not at others? History, historiography, and memory are not identical; each has its own timeline. But they are not entirely disconnected.

Ellis Island has at times been invoked in France as a museum to emulate. A very early French 'mission' of historians went there to investigate.² I would like to take up the Franco-American comparison here, both with regard to history and especially to its representation through museums. The French frequently compare their country to the United States, often lamenting a French lag with regard to things American. In a rhetoric of comparison from Tocqueville to the present, 'America' has been called upon as an example to follow – or to avoid at all costs. American immigration history more generally has been pointed to as proof that the history of immigration can and should be part of France's history, as in the United States. I have argued elsewhere that the French invocation of American immigration history has frequently 'flattened' the latter, assuming erroneously that immigration has been a constant of American history, historiography and memory, and remaining impervious to the great

oscillations of its periods of welcome and those of rejection.³ However, the 'use' of another model is produced by and for those using it. I explore the Ellis Island and CNHI projects here not so much to question the (limited) rhetorical value of the former for the latter but as a way of examining issues of history, memory, and amnesia through an exploration of the choices taken in museum-making.

ELLIS ISLAND, FROM GULLS AND OYSTERS TO TOURISTS⁴

The history of Ellis Island, whether as entry-point for twelve million immigrants to the United States between 1892 and 1954,⁵ or as a new port of entry for the memory of migration in the United States today, is little known in France. And I daresay the link between the island's history and its memorialization is also less linear than most visitors to the Ellis Island museum suspect. Ellis-the-Island is a classic example of changing use over time and the ever-changing relationship of memory to history. The story of its opening, its closing, and its reopening as a museum is that of a multitude of decisions – political, economic – that mark changing perceptions about immigration, ranging from praise to indifference to political calculations to nostalgia.

The first owners of the island were of course Native American Indians, who called it *Kioshk* or *Gull Island* after its principal visitors. When the Dutch settled in New Amsterdam, it was used for picnics and renamed *Oyster Island*. After the English in turn chased away the Dutch it became known as *Gibbet Island*, since pirates were hanged there. The island ultimately became private property, and its first recorded owner, in the late eighteenth century, was a Mr Samuel Ellis, whose name stuck even after the State of New York took possession in 1794 in order to build fortifications on the harbour outpost. With persisting fear of invasion, the federal government took over the island in 1808 for use as a munitions depot.

The 'invasions' were to be civil rather than military. A sign of the times, and of the history of mass immigration to the United States, the State of New York opened an immigrant-processing centre in the southern part of Manhattan in 1855. *Castle Garden*, 'the fort that let outsiders in', served this purpose until 1890. (It then became an aquarium, from 1896 to 1941, when it was razed to make way for a bridge that was never built.) Although it processed eight million immigrants over forty-five years of loyal service, *Castle Garden* has nowhere near the name recognition of *Ellis Island*, which handled twelve million over sixty-two years.⁶

Castle Garden was too small, conditions were poor, and corruption apparently rampant. After an interim solution in Manhattan, its operations were transferred to *Ellis Island*, which was inaugurated in 1892. Yet conditions were still poor, and the food service largely inadequate. (European immigrants complained bitterly, among other things, about ginger ale. It was the main beverage provided until saloons with wine and

beer were finally introduced – and harshly criticized in turn, this time by temperance militants.) Worse yet, a fire destroyed the wood buildings in 1897, and the facility had to be closed for three years.

The new central building (the location of the museum today) – described by one immigrant as a palace on the outside, a prison on the inside – was built with the idea that immigration was on the wane due to economic depression in the United States and industrialization in Europe.⁷ However, its reopening in 1900 corresponded to the beginning of a major surge in immigration to the United States from Eastern and Southern Europe. An all-time record was set in 1907 when fifteen ships arrived in one day with a total of 22,000 passengers. Eighty percent of all passengers only stayed from three to five hours on the island, and a mere two per cent of those arriving were rejected and sent home. Nevertheless, Ellis Island was feared world-wide as a place where detention or rejection was possible. The peak years of 1900 to 1914 are in many ways still at the core of representations of mass immigration to the United States. But they were in fact the beginning of the end of Ellis Island's heyday.

The First World War and rising xenophobia tolled the knell of the European mass immigration to the United States. (Chinese immigration had already been halted in 1882.) Quota Laws in 1921 and 1924 set limits according to national origins and drastically reduced the number of legal entries. A secondary effect of these laws was that the image of immigration was frozen, evoking essentially this earlier period. The era before World War One, with its Eastern and Southern European immigrants, was to be the period that first captured the imagination of historians in the 1970s as the historiography of immigration in the United States was reborn.

Activity at Ellis Island thus declined throughout the interwar period, and during the Second World War the site was transformed into a concentration camp for Germans and Italians – a part of its history rarely mentioned. Several thousand displaced persons then passed through the island to enter the United States after the war, but the Quota Laws were still in effect, fundamentally untouched by the reforms of the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952. As one of its last functions, Ellis Island became a holding place for militant activists and people without visas in the process of expulsion.

In 1954 the government closed the site. The buildings started to deteriorate under the combined impact of the salty air and vandals (in canoes). But Ellis Island became obsolete for other reasons, one ethnic, the other technological. In the mid 1960s, thanks largely to the unintended impact of the new immigration legislation of 1965, there was a shift in the origins of immigrants to the United States: henceforth they came from the South (of America) and the West (Asia) rather than the East (of Europe). Hispanics and Asians soon transformed the image of immigrants in America. Following a movement begun in the interwar period, some entered on foot or by swimming (across the Rio Grande). Others came by airplane.

Ellis Island lost its historical *raison d'être* as the main port of entry. Its function as a site of memory could begin. But it did so only slowly.

ELLIS ISLAND, HISTORY, HISTORIOGRAPHY, AND MEMORY

Setting up a museum was but one of various options that were discussed in the 1950s as a solution for the abandoned buildings. Some favoured an attraction park or a casino. The government wanted to sell off the island but was prevented by those who believed it should remain government property. It was not until 1965, with the discussion of the new immigration legislation, that President Johnson – looking for consensus somewhere in this contentious Vietnam War era – signed a bill declaring Ellis Island and Bedloe Island (where the Statue of Liberty is located) to be historic monuments.

Two things delayed any further action. The Vietnam War polarized criticism of other aspects of American history, while the Civil Rights movement focused minority activism first and foremost, as was necessary, on African-American history. Yet, the ‘times they were a-changin’’, and the interest in Black Studies ultimately spawned a more generalized search for ‘roots’ – first by African Americans then by descendants of the mass European immigration. Immigration history, which had been called for since the 1920s by historians such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Marcus Lee Hansen, had taken a back seat to Depression, War, and post-war consensus.⁸ Even in the early 1970s and into the 1980s, immigration historians were still complaining that immigration was not fully a part of American historiography.⁹ Not surprisingly, it took until the ‘ethnic renaissance’ of the 1970s for Ellis Island to be resuscitated as a national icon.

As discussion raged concerning the fate of the buildings, Native American Indians tried – unsuccessfully – to reclaim Ellis Island. From 1970 to 1973, the island was used as a drug rehabilitation center. Finally, the Bicentennial celebration of the United States in 1976 and the centennial of the Statue of Liberty in 1986 gave impetus to the restoration of the immigration-processing centre. Memory – circumscribed by time and place – reactivated history.

The dilapidated site was reopened to the public in 1976, but it took another fourteen years and a major fundraising campaign for the museum to be inaugurated. 156 million dollars were raised over a span of eight years thanks to efforts ranging from bake sales to substantial donors to those who paid to use the patriotic logo. The renovated central building was opened as the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in 1990, to great success.

The paradoxes of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum are numerous. On the one hand, immigration is but a portion of the island’s long history from gulls to guns, from arrivals to deportations. On the other, Ellis Island is but a part of the history of immigration to the United States, even if it has become a metonymic shorthand for that history. In fact, the Ellis Island

immigration station received only a small proportion of all of those who came to the US from abroad in the last two centuries. Even during the key period of mass immigration, from the opening of Ellis Island (1892) through the Quota Laws (1921–24), a good quarter of the European immigrants to the United States arrived through other ports – Boston, New Orleans, Galveston. And the focus on Ellis Island has, until recently, hidden from view those Asian immigrants who entered (or tried to) via Angel Island, near San Francisco.¹⁰ Furthermore, first-class passengers did not have to line up at Ellis Island and nor have the millions of Latin Americans or Asian immigrants who have arrived by other means to the United States since 1965.

The history of immigration, extending from Castle Garden to JFK airport today, is thus much longer and wider than Ellis Island's immigration history. I would argue that it is the 'ethnic renaissance' and the historiographic renewal that accompanied it which best explain the impulse behind the museum of memory. In return, 'memory' and the economics of fund-raising have expanded the museum's purpose beyond the sole history of the site. Ellis Island-the-memorial-site, rather than Ellis Island-the-historic-location, now seeks to embrace unto itself all of US immigration history. The American Immigrant Wall of Memory in particular has widened the net of representation and of donors. It now celebrates 'family heritage' as well as 'American immigration' in general, and inscription on the Wall of Memory is open to anyone, regardless of place of origin or port of entry. At \$100 for a single-name inscription (the price is scheduled to go up soon and special-format inscriptions are more expensive) and with approximately 75,000 places available, the commerce of memory should ultimately be able to raise at least \$7,500,000 for the museum.¹¹ Those whose ancestors were forced migrants such as slaves, but American Indians too, are also welcome to propose names for inscription.¹² 'Memory' has far bypassed history, while few remember the pirates, the gunpowder or the oysters.

LA CNHI: THE MAKING OF A FRENCH NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IMMIGRATION HISTORY

If the Ellis Island Museum is at times mentioned in the context of planning for the CNHI (Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration), it is perhaps because the Ellis Island Immigration Museum has the virtue of already existing, in a city oft-visited, and the long period of the site's abandonment and the complex history of its gestation as a museum are little known. The CNHI organizers have also visited many other immigration museums and other history and ethnographic museums around the United States and Europe. The CNHI may dream of becoming a French Ellis Island in that it will be the major high-profile museum of the history of immigration in France. But the project is necessarily different, indeed more ambitious and

more difficult than its American counterpart. Ellis Island is a museum that commemorates a site where immigration actually occurred. Its strength lies in the retracing the steps of past immigrants, from arrival through the anxiety of waiting, through the medical exam and on to entry to America. The core of the museum is built around the receiving hall itself.

The CNHI's purpose of historical representation is, from the outset, a much larger one: to represent a vast fresco of all of French immigration history over the last two centuries. That history is not conceived around the building in which it is to be housed: the project came first, the choice of the building later. Indeed, the edifice may even be more of a hindrance than a help. An early debate about where to place an immigration museum confronted the eternal French problem of Paris versus the provinces. Suggestions included Marseille, historically a major port of entry; Saint-Denis, on the northern outskirts of Paris, today a heavily immigrant suburb; or the abandoned Renault auto works in Boulogne-Billancourt just southwest of Paris, where many immigrants laboured. In the end, Paris won out (as usual), with the idea that such a museum should be centrally located. Several buildings currently 'available' within Paris were examined, and the Palais de la Porte Dorée was ultimately chosen because of its striking character as a historic monument. But as a result the museum has had to construct itself *against* the building in which it is housed, rather than, *thanks to* it, as at Ellis Island. And the CNHI project has faced repeated criticisms about that choice.

The Palais de la Porte Dorée has its own problematic history. Built as the entrance hall for the Colonial Exhibition in Paris in 1931, it was one of the few buildings that remained standing after the Exhibition closed its doors after six months and eight million visitors.¹³ Commonly referred to as the Musée des colonies from 1932 until 1960, decolonization got the best of it, and the building was only saved from abandonment when it was transformed by Culture Minister André Malraux into the Musée des arts africains et océaniens. In 2003, this museum closed its doors, as its collections were transferred to the highly touted new Musée du Quai Branly. But the bas reliefs on the outer wall and the striking frescos in the main hall remain – offensive yet historic and legally preserved thus untouchable, a legacy to the French hubris of its 'mission civilisatrice'. At the very least, these structural elements of the building need to be seriously 'deconstructed' in order: to explain (away) their stereotypical representations of the colonial other; to situate and critique the French Republic's high opinion of itself at the height of its imperial empire; and furthermore to remind visitors that the history of immigration is not just that of colonial and post-colonial immigration alone, but a longer history of immigration since the early nineteenth century. The project's directors and historical advisory board have argued (optimistically? too academically?) that housing a museum of immigration history in a former museum of the colonies will be a clever, symbolic, thumbing of the nose at France's

colonial past. Patrick Bouchain, the architect chosen to transform the building, has insisted that many buildings go through changes of use, and the transformation of a 'palace of the colonies' into a 'palace of immigration' – which may be considered a double insult whether by those still nostalgic for the colonies or by those immigrants or their descendants who feel angry at walking through such halls – is in fact a way of settling a score with history: 'régler une compte à l'histoire'.¹⁴ A museum of (one) history in order to critique (another) history. But will everyone get it?

CNHI, HISTORY, HISTORIOGRAPHY, AND MEMORY

If the history of Ellis Island's museum can be correlated to the renewal of the historiography and memory of immigration in the United States, similarly, the new immigration-history museum in Paris is also a function of timing: of the rise in interest in the history and historiography of immigration in France. While the history of immigration to France itself is 'old', historical knowledge and historiography, there as elsewhere, have lagged behind historical fact. Memory and the history of immigration as a field of inquiry have taken off in France since the last third of the twentieth century. An important article by Michelle Perrot in 1960 is often cited as paving the way from a labour history of the French working class to recognition of immigrants as a significant part of that history. An important conference on the subject was organized by the CNRS (the major research-funding organization in France) in Montpellier in 1972.¹⁵ Those who participated in it, along with other historians such as Serge Bonnet, Jean-Charles Bonnet, Philippe Dewitte, René Gallissot, Dominique Lahalle, Pierre Milza, Janine Ponty, Ralph Schor, Benjamin Stora, Emile Témime and Rolande Trespé, became interested in the history of immigration to France early on. A centre for research on Italian immigration history, the CEDEI (Centre d'études et de documentation de l'immigration italienne), created in 1987, was the first of its kind. Then two books published in 1988 and widely reviewed – *Le creuset* by Gérard Noiriel and *La mosaïque France* edited by Yves Lequin – marked (and abetted) a more general renewal of interest in the topic of foreign origins of the French.¹⁶

In 1990, an Association pour un musée de l'immigration was set up to push forward the idea of an immigration museum, and a fact-finding mission went to visit the newly-opened Ellis Island museum the following year. Academics were enthusiastic about a museum, but nothing came of the suggestion. Any project of that nature in France, where museums are state-funded, needs a certain level of official backing, and with the rise in the 1980s of a far-right political force focusing on immigration-bashing, the socialist government in power apparently did not want to stick out its neck on such a high-profile topic. History as danger.

At the same time, a private-run association named Génériques was founded in late 1987 for the purpose of ‘engaging and supporting all scientific and cultural activities that would further an increase in the knowledge of migration in France and in the world’. With modest means but great determination, it went ahead with efforts aimed at promoting the history of immigration in France: identifying and cataloguing public and private archives; creating a prize for the best dissertation on the subject; and founding a magazine, *Migrance* (1992), dedicated to the history of immigration and publishing several useful guides to sources therein. It has also recently completed a four-volume guide to archival sources on foreigners in France, co-edited with the Archives de France.¹⁷ Génériques also set up one of the first temporary exhibits on the topic, in 1989, entitled ‘France des étrangers, France des libertés,’ which charted the history of immigration to France through the myriad newspapers created by different immigrant groups.¹⁸

A second important exhibit, *Toute la France*, curated by the Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine, took place in 1998. Organized around groups (Russians, Poles, Algerians and so on) and themes (education, sports, art, cuisine, the world wars), the only problem for this otherwise very successful exhibit was that it had too much to show in too small a space. This too fed into the idea of the need for a permanent museum dedicated to the history of immigration in France.¹⁹

DELAYS, SPEED AND POLITICS

Interest in a museum grew, and in 2001 Lionel Jospin, then Socialist Prime Minister, commissioned a report from Driss El Yazami (delegate-general of Génériques) and Rémy Schwartz (maître de requêtes of the Conseil d’Etat). Submitted in November of that year, it argued strongly in favour of the creation of a Centre national de l’histoire et des cultures de l’immigration. Then nothing happened. Different explanations for this non-action on the part of the Socialists abound: rumour blames inter-agency governmental squabbling (jealousies, who was to pay?), political wet feet (again), the approach of the 2002 presidential elections,²⁰ and reluctance by the Socialists to be too closely identified with a topic – immigrants – that the rising far right abhorred. The project was filed in a drawer.

In a surprising twist of fate (from the perspective of most immigration historians), the centre-right government of Jacques Chirac resuscitated the project. Why? Because he was elected in 2002 by eighty-five per cent of the electorate over the extreme right-wing candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and thus had the strength of numbers behind him? Was it simply an electoral ploy? Was he concerned with how his presidency would go down in History? In 2003, Jacques Toubon,²¹ close political ally of Chirac, was appointed to head yet another committee: the Commission de préfiguration du Centre de ressources et de mémoire de l’immigration. Working closely with Luc Gruson,

director of the Agence pour le Développement des Relations Interculturelles (ADRI, an organization dedicated to intercultural matters), and Philippe Dewitte, director of the journal *Hommes et Migrations*, Toubon met with the Commission for a year. The project was officially approved in July of 2004, with a scheduled opening for April 2007.

Why, after such a long delay, such a rush for completion? It is unheard of to open a museum within such a short time, particularly one with no pre-existing collection. But the French political schedule dictated its timing. In April of 2007 there would be another presidential election, and Jacques Chirac clearly wanted to inaugurate an immigration museum before leaving office.²² Along with the Musée du Quai Branly, he would be leaving two major museums dealing with 'the Other' as part of his legacy.

The slow growth of an immigration-history museum in France is thus partly due to the evolution of memory and historiography, as in the United States, but also in large part to French party politics. Many historians had despaired that such a museum would ever see the light of day, and for the most part they expected a Socialist government would have created it. If the Socialists couldn't manage to get the credit for such an initiative, then *tant pis* for them [too bad]; and if (with a French shrug of the shoulders) the Right decided to do it, well, *pourquoi pas* [why not]? As Marie-Claude Blanc-Chaléard has commented, 'La gauche l'a rêvé, la droite l'a fait'.²³ Initially wary of such a political alliance, the historians were convinced by the (left) political and historian credentials of Philippe Dewitte²⁴ to participate in the Commission de préfiguration.²⁵ But their participation has remained conditional on keeping politics out of the content of the museum itself. Toubon turned out to be very sensitive to the history of immigration in France and a remarkably open, enthusiastic supporter of both the museum and the historians. Thanks to the absence of any overt political line being imposed on the exhibits themselves, the project has moved ahead.²⁶

The greater irony is that the long delay over opening such a museum has led it to become embroiled in current affairs to an extent never anticipated by its initiators. Whereas twenty years ago, such a museum might have been a ho-hum historians' project – a nice idea but hardly polemical – in the interval between the start of the Toubon commission and fall 2006 (the time of this writing), race relations in France have deteriorated and become more openly contentious. Major events have pitted historians against lawmakers and immigrants' children against the police. A law of 23 February 2005 included a clause stipulating that school programmes should teach the 'positive role' of French colonization and this led to a heated debate over form and substance. Historians, the vast majority of whom are critical of colonization, were also generally outraged that the government should confound history and memory and claim the right to dictate historical analysis. (After a year of tergiversation, Chirac finally abolished the clause.) Shortly after the Palais de la Porte Dorée was chosen as the site for the museum, a group of *sans papiers*

(undocumented immigrants) briefly occupied the grounds, arguing that money should be allocated to living immigrants, not dead ones. And then there were the riots of November 2005, when hardline members of Toubon's and Chirac's UMP party (notably Nicolas Sarkozy) came out with demeaning and xenophobic statements criticizing the second-generation youth, which provoked a vigorous response on the part of the immigration historians involved in the museum project.²⁷

WHAT AND WHOM TO INCLUDE?

Since the CNHI, unlike Ellis Island, was not initially defined by a period or a function, the question of what to represent has been at the core of initial discussions surrounding the scope of the museum. Who should be included and represented? Ellis Island began as a museum of the 'old' European immigration, although it has ultimately expanded its image to include the post-1965, Asian and Hispanic immigration as well. The French problem is the opposite. In France, colonial and post-colonial immigration dominate the conceptualization of immigration, to the extent of rendering earlier immigrations almost invisible. From the start, the CNHI has sought to present an all-inclusive history of immigration, representing the 'old' European immigration along with the new, North African, Sub-Saharan African, Turkish, Chinese and other contemporary immigrations. But the issue is not as clear-cut as it may seem.

How to organize the permanent exhibit: thematically, chronologically, by groups? – in the wake of the *Annales* school these are questions at the heart of any social history project. How to present the nuances and debates of historical research on, for example, the role of the state, both as 'integrator' and as gatekeeper of border control? Immigration historians in France do not themselves always agree as to the weight of a 'French model' of integration versus the representation of cultural diversity or of showing the difficulties of migration, poverty, and xenophobia, while showing successes of settlement as well. And, finally, there is constant concern that an aestheticized representation might overwhelm the historical record itself, leading to classic conflicts between academics and curators.

The definition of 'immigration' has been integral to an on-going discussion surrounding the museum, not entirely resolved to this date. One of the first choices had to do with circumscribing the chronological scope of the museum. Arguably, the history of immigration into France is a long one, reaching back to Burgondes and Visigoths, itinerant students, clerics, artisans, the wandering poor, not to mention those invited into the service of the king and the mobile nobility from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period.²⁸ Another viewpoint, however, is that the history of immigration dates to the creation of the nation-state (the French Revolution), that immigration is essentially a political act, the result of crossing state boundaries: national identity papers create the citizen and

distinguish the non-citizen.²⁹ For other historians, immigration is linked more generally to the experience of migration. Agency rather than state practices define the condition of the immigrant and therefore pre-modern movement counts.³⁰ Ultimately it was decided that a Prologue to the main exhibit will remind visitors of the longer history of movement into France, while the museum will highlight the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is due not simply to the weight of the nation-state in defining the contours of immigration but also to the importance of industrialization, urbanization and repeated worries over ‘depopulation’, which combined to incite a veritable mass immigration into France, especially from the late nineteenth century on.³¹

But the question of ‘papers’ versus experience is not just one of chronology in defining immigration. Even for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although foreign nationals will be the main focus of the museum, what about French citizens who hail from abroad? Algerians before Algerian independence who lived in metropolitan France had French citizenship – ‘immigrants’ or not? And what about ‘internal’ movement to the Hexagon (continental France) from the Antilles or the Réunion, far-flung colonial territories which remain part of France today? Those with French citizenship may experience movement as immigration, both through their own understanding and in the eyes of others. Historians are beginning to include Pieds-Noirs (French citizens living in Algeria who fled to France after Algerian independence) or French West Indians in the definition of immigration. But the groups and individuals themselves can be divided between those who emphasize their citizenship and would not want to be melded into the category of immigrants and others who are in the process of reclaiming the full history of their belonging to France, with its colonial or post-colonial difficulties, and are affronted at the idea of being *excluded* from a museum of immigration.³² And such attitudes – memory or historical consciousness – can change over time.

CNHI, THE NAMING OF THE MUSEUM

Unlike Ellis Island, the CNHI had no obvious predetermined label. On 8 July 2004, when Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin announced official approval of the museum, he also proclaimed its title. The Commission de préfiguration had weakly suggested ‘Musée de l’histoire et des cultures de l’immigration’ and had never come up with anything snappier. The ‘Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration’ was constructed in some governmental office (apparently without Toubon’s prior knowledge).

The component parts of the name are each significant and indicative of debate concerning the content of the museum itself. *Cité* was chosen instead of *Musée*, to the dismay of most of the Commission’s members. There had been heated discussion over the use of the term museum. Officials from

the Musées de France had argued that the term was not applicable since the project had no 'collection' (of famous paintings?). The Commission de préfiguration however felt strongly that the term would ennoble the project (and that museums were no longer the dusty dark places of yesteryear). To a non-native French speaker, the word *cit * also has the disadvantage of being frequently used to describe the lower-class housing projects in which poor immigrants and their offspring live. This understanding of the word has been allayed by native speakers, who argue that *cit * simply means city, in the Greek sense of the term. Furthermore, other recent museum projects in Paris have used the word to name their multifaceted activities: Cit  de la Musique; Cit  des Sciences et de l'industrie at La Villette.

Why '*nationale*'? Isn't immigration a fundamentally transnational activity? And certainly not all immigrants become naturalized. Was this politics mapping an assimilationist project of the French nation-state on to the site or simply linking the Paris museum to a national network of immigrant associations in a 'r seau' which is one of the pillars of the project? Some argue that the term 'national' shows the level of recognition by the centralized French state. For others, it is *un mot de trop* (one word too many).

The word '*histoire*' came to replace both 'culture' and 'memory' in previous proposals. The historians, anxious to spread the word, can hardly object to that, but many recognize that culture at least also has its part to play in any such enterprise. In meeting after meeting, the term '*immigration*' has also raised the question of 'emigration'. How will the countries of origin be included in the story of arrival? Finally, the French critical spirit being what it is, someone got up from the floor at a conference in December 2004, that presented the project, to question the singular form of 'the' in 'l'*histoire*'.³³ Wouldn't the plural, *les histoires*, be more accurate, he argued?

In any case, the initials CNHI are unpronounceable, and, given the French propensity for popularly describing major sites based on their location, the building may simply become known as the Mus e de la Porte dor e, or 'the Golden Door Museum'.³⁴

HISTORY, MEMORY, CHOICES

The furthering of social peace is a tall order for a history museum. The problems of defining 'immigration' in France are multiple and freighted by the fact that the term remains derogatory in popular parlance, in large part due to political rhetoric that is fundamentally ahistorical. Post-colonial immigration, Algerian immigration in particular (and the scars of the Algerian War), has become the metonym for immigration in general in France. This is the opposite of the Ellis Island situation where European immigrants stood for the whole. The long history of European immigration to France has sometimes been minimized, and other groups, such as the

Indochinese, for example, get ‘forgotten’ even in the recent post-colonial debates about immigration.

Jacques Toubon, in response to critics from the right and the general sense that ‘immigration’ is a bad word in France, has argued forcefully that the museum’s purpose is indeed to change the very significance of the word. As Marianne Amar, head of the museum’s Research and Publications department, has often commented, the double purpose of the museum is ‘connaissance et reconnaissance’, knowledge and recognition of immigration.

Historians of immigration have often argued that knowledge of the past can help understand the present. But the lessons of memory show us that it is not just the past that explains the present, but often the present that explains the past. The CNHI is attempting to reassert the power of history over memory. Yet, like all forms of historiography and memory, and like the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, the CNHI will be made up of choices: who, when, what. Whether or not it can possibly mend the social contract, will it at least be an effective history lesson?

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Minister of Culture, speech at the inauguration of the worksite at the Palais de la Porte Dorée, 2 Oct. 2006.

2 Cf. letter of instruction, 10 March 2003, from the Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, to Jacques Toubon, creating the Commission de préfiguration; Raffarin also mentioned museums elsewhere.

3 The long and complex history of mass immigration to the United States, beginning in the mid nineteenth century and fraught with periods of rejection and xenophobia, is for the most part forgotten in this vision of US immigration, as is any understanding of the *renewal* of US immigration historiography in the 1970s–80s. Nancy L. Green, ‘“Le Melting-Pot”: Made in America, Produced in France’, *Journal of American History* 86: 3, Dec. 1999, pp. 1,188–208. Most recently, for a long historical review of the issue: Aristide Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America*, Cambridge, Mass., 2006.

4 A good part of what follows on Ellis Island was first published, in French, as: Nancy L. Green, ‘L’île de Monsieur Ellis, du dépôt de munitions au lieu de mémoire’, *Hommes et migrations* 1,247, Jan.–Feb. 2004, pp. 40–7. For the general history of the site, see Wilton S. Tift, *Ellis Island*, Chicago, 1990; Thomas M. Pitkin, *Keepers of the Gate: a History of Ellis Island*, New York, 1975; Harlan D. Unrau, *Ellis Island/Statue of Liberty National Monument*, Washington DC, 1984, 3 vols.

5 This figure, referring to those third-class passengers who had to be processed through immigration control from 1892 to 1954, varies from twelve to seventeen million, even in the official documentation; the lower figure is the most frequent. At the same time, the digitized

passenger lists for the period 1892–1924 are estimated at twenty-two million on the Ellis Island website (<http://www.ellisland.org/search/index.asp>, viewed 10 Oct. 2006). This figure includes immigrants, crew members and other passengers who came through the New York port and is a reminder that immigrants were only half of those coming and going.

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10 Roger Daniels, 'No Lamps Were Lit for Them: Angel Island and the Historiography of Asian American Immigration', *Journal of American Ethnic History* 17: 1, fall 1997, pp. 3–18.

11 http://www.wallofhonor.org/wall_of_honor.asp (6 Oct. 2006).

12 www.ellisland.com.

13 And not thirty-four million as listed on the Wikipedia article; that figure represents entrance tickets sold, not people; the organizers estimated that people visited the Exhibition an average of four times each. Charles-Robert Ageron, 'L'Exposition coloniale de 1931: Mythe républicain ou mythe impérial?', in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora, vol. 1 pp. 561–91, 577. See also Patricia A. Morton, *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition*, Cambridge, Mass., 2000; Herman Lebovics, *True France: the Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900–1945*, Ithaca, 1992; Catherine Hodeir and Michel Pierre, *L'exposition coloniale: 1931*, Brussels, 1991.

14 Patrick Bouchain, film 'Suivez leurs regards', on the CNHI website: www.histoire-immigration.fr on the first page or under link: Inauguration du chantier (15 Oct. 2006).

15 Michelle Perrot, 'Les rapports des ouvriers français et des étrangers (1871–1893)', *Bulletin de la Société d'histoire moderne* 12e série, n° 12, pp. 4–9 (supplement to the *Revue d'Histoire moderne et contemporaine* 1, 1960); Commission internationale d'histoire des mouvements sociaux et des structures sociales, *Les Migrations internationales de la fin du XVIIIe siècle à nos jours* [1972 conference proceedings], Paris, 1980.

16 Gérard Noiriel, *Le creuset français: Histoire de l'immigration XIXe-XXe siècles*, Paris, 1988 [*The French Melting Pot: Immigration, Citizenship, and National Identity*, Minneapolis, 1996]; *La mosaïque France: Histoire des étrangers et de l'immigration*, ed. Yves Lequin, Paris, (1988), 2006.

17 Association Génériques, *Les étrangers en France: Guide des sources d'archives publiques et privées: XIXe-XXe siècles*, 4 vols, Paris, 1999, 2005.

18 For more information on Génériques, see www.generiques.org. The exhibition catalogue: *France des étrangers, France des libertés, Presse et mémoire*, Paris, 1990.

19 *Toute la France: Histoire de l'immigration en France au XXe siècle*, ed. Laurent Gervereau, Pierre Milza and Emile Témime, Paris, 1998.

20 The widely-anticipated run-off between the centre-right incumbent Jacques Chirac and the socialist Lionel Jospin turned into a débâcle when Jospin lost second place narrowly to Jean-Marie Le Pen, far right-wing demagogue. The Chirac-Le Pen stand-off led to an 85% victory for Chirac, but the Socialists went down in ignominious defeat.

21 Toubon is a European deputy and a former mayor of the thirteenth arrondissement of Paris (1983–2001), former Minister of Culture (1993–95), and former Minister of Justice (1995–97).

22 He may inaugurate a very very preliminary facility, only for it to be re-inaugurated by his successor. Similarly, the Bibliothèque nationale de France-site François Mitterrand was inaugurated twice: once by Mitterrand in March 1995, nine months before he died (inaugurating the completion of the main building), and then by Jacques Chirac in December 1996, when the top floor was actually opened. (The rez-de-jardin research floor was not opened until October 1998.)

23 Marie-Claude Blanc-Chaléard, 'Du "non-lieu de mémoire" à la "CNHI"', *Diasporas* 6, June 2005, p. 16; see also her 'Une Cité nationale pour l'histoire de l'immigration: Genèse, enjeu, obstacles', *Vingtième siècle, Revue d'histoire* 92, Oct.–Dec. 2006, pp. 131–40.

24 See the September–October 2005 issue of *Hommes et Migrations* (no. 1,257) in honour of Philippe Dewitte ('Trajectoire d'un intellectuel engagé'), who died tragically of a brain tumour in May 2005.

25 Including myself.

26 Jacques Toubon programmed a reading of Aimé Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955) as one of the inaugural events of the Palais de la Porte Dorée, on Bastille Day (14 July 2006).

27 Marie-Claude Blanc-Chaléard, Nancy Green, Gérard Noiriel, Janine Ponty, Emile Témime, Vincent Viet, Marie-Christine Volovitch-Tavarès, Patrick Weil, 'Immigration et Histoire', *Le Monde*, 29 Nov. 2005.

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29 For example, Gérard Noiriel, *La tyrannie du national: Le droit d'asile en Europe 1793–1993*, Paris, 1991; Patrick Weil, *La France et ses étrangers: L'aventure d'une politique d'immigration, 1938–1991*, Paris, 1991; Alexis Spire, *Etrangers à la carte: L'administration l'immigration en France 1945–1975*, Paris, 2005.

30 As Jacques Toubon once stated, 'la vie est plus complexe que les définitions juridiques': 29 Sept. 2006, at the CNHI conference 'Histoire et immigration: la question coloniale', Paris.

31 See the film 'Repères' on the www.histoire-immigration.fr website.

32 Session on 'Les Caraïbes et les métropoles' at the CNHI conference on 'Histoire et immigration: La question coloniale', 29 Sept. 2006.

33 On this conference, see the special issue of *Hommes et migrations* entitled 'Les chantiers de l'histoire: Historiographie de l'immigration', no. 1,255, May–June 2005.

34 Thus, the Charles-de-Gaulle airport is called 'Roissy' after the city in which it is located; the Pompidou Center is called 'Beaubourg' after the street it is on. And, after great debate over the suggested title 'Musée des Arts premiers', the new museum is officially called simply after its location: the 'Musée du Quai Branly'.