

# Cottonian Tragedy

Ari Gautier, translation by Ananya Jahanara Kabir

Gossypium arbarium... Gossypium herbaceum... Gossypium barbadense... Gossypium hirsutum...

In the beginning, I was but fibre.

I was plucked, and I was transformed into a thread to make me into a cloth.

Cloth I could have remained, to cover the nudity of humanity.

Canvas I could have stayed, to unfurl the dream of free men.

Alas, my fate was stolen-- to turn me into the shroud of broken fates.

Blue was I in Pondicherry, blood red I became on Senegambia's shores.

Guinea, whispered the water.

Can you wipe a river's tears with these tawdry tatters?

I became a gag to silence the noises of chains

They used me to wipe blood, wring out sweat, scrub bodies, dust off infamy

To buff up clear conscience and to clean up shame.

In the hold I cleaned wounds

I bandaged the foreigner's pain

I muffled the moans of a ransacked continent.

Witness to barbarism, to cruelty and bestiality,

I hang like some vulgar flag on the death-stained mast.

Madras, whispered the ocean.

Caribbean!!! When your shores blow the wind that whistles through the sail and the mast, I bend with shame.

I dry tears.

I cover bodies bruised by whiplashes.

I swaddle swollen flesh that remembers the savanna's soft breeze.

I wrap up death to give it beauty and innocence.

I clothe savagery with the civilizing mission

And parade the conscience dressed in the Pharisee's garb.

But -- who attached this piece of sugar to the end of my kerchief?

Legba welcomes Karuppu sami

Ba mouin la main, fwè

Negro, nègrier, Negritude

Zindian, girmitya, alegromitya...  
Master, slaves, the indentured, durais...  
Colonised, colonies, colonisers...  
I wipe off the white words on my blackboard  
Can we erase memory?  
The thappatai, the djembe, the gwoka, resonate on the fragmented  
archipelago  
The Afrovidian cries... Kreyol!  
Ki Kreyol? Retorts the archipelago of fragments.