

☞ CONCLUSION ☞

BEYOND SLAVERY

Guadeloupean and Martinican artists have been reclaiming the Caribbean past. They have enfranchised themselves from the symbolically charged heritage of the Enlightenment and of the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement. Refusing to subscribe to the cultural construction of victimization, they communicate dignity, strength, and determination through their artwork. While the memorials are often accompanied by Western representations of slavery, their message emerges from a combination of Caribbean and European heritages. They narrate stories of the past that fill the void left by the silence of history.

This artwork envisions the present and the future through the past. While facing the collective grave of their ancestors in the “gray vault,” or the symbols of torture and death, the statues exude a celebratory quality that goes beyond the tragic memory evoked. The memory has engendered strength; death and torture have been overcome; the chains of servitude have been broken; and liberty has been born. The symbolic thrust is into the present and future as expressed by Valérie Mylène: “today you exist / I want you and I experience you.” While the poet knows that her liberty was “born from the blood shed by our enslaved fathers,” she jubilates because she is free today. Informed by the knowledge of the past, she looks toward the future now.

The slave past must be told, the silences voiced, and the incoherences analyzed. There is an important place for exploring the correlation between the Enlightenment, the slave regime, and emancipation. Understanding the impact of the

maroon both as a historical and mythical figure is primordial. Fascinating are the crisscrossings of ideologies and revolts during the age of revolutions. The transformation of this memory through the process of assimilation sheds light on the French Caribbeans' troubled relationship to the past. And finally, contemporary artistic renderings of the slaves' silenced engagement for freedom claim a rightful share of the past. Nonetheless, it is crucial to go beyond the slave era once it has been appropriately brought to light and rendered conscious in the people's imagination.

In her thought-provoking novel *La Belle Créole*, the Guadeloupean writer Maryse Condé (2001) depicts the dangerous obsession with the slave past. The protagonist Dieudonné was exonerated for killing his white mistress. His defense lawyer Maître Serbulon successfully built his case on the premise that Dieudonné was reenacting the age-old rebellion of the defenseless slave against the cruel white mistress. He killed her to liberate himself (44). Operating under the assumption that the country had only recently emerged from slavery—no less than a hundred fifty years ago—(40), Serbulon made a collective drama out of a trivial event (164). The people, he believed, still identified themselves as descendants of slaves (48) and shared a generalized hatred of the *békés* (white Creole planters) (138). While Serbulon convinced the jury, his “absurd theories” misrepresented his client's experience (227). Dieudonné felt that “he had no truth; he was nothing but a carnival figure, dressed in rags, travestied by his compatriots' fantasies” (52). He was not the revolted slave people saw in him, but a grieving lover who had acted in self-defense and deeply mourned the loss of his love (227).

Dieudonné refused to see himself as a victim of society. He did not feel that he belonged to the oppressed classes: “Oppressed by whom? Oppressed by what?” He had simply been unlucky, born into a bad cradle. It was a question of fate (Condé 2001: 75). He had certainly never considered himself oppressed by Loraine, his white mistress. On the contrary, she was everything for him; she was his life; he was enslaved by his love for her. Dieudonné was not the only one to disbelieve Serbulon's theories. Both Loraine and his father Milo scoffed at the lingering presence of slavery. As far as Loraine was concerned only idiots thought that slavery was still alive today (179). Milo considered the talk of slavery foolishness nobody believed in anymore; he remained unconvinced by Serbulon's case (193). Dieudonné became entrapped in the superimpo-

sition of the slave past on his present reality. Ironically, his juridical liberation fettered him. Having officially been turned into a victim of slavery, he could no longer project himself into the future—a future of which Loraine was forever absent. Ultimately, Dieudonné was only able to imagine his freedom through suicide.

La Belle Créole shows what is at stake in the mythicization of slavery. The past has a limited applicability when it comes to explaining the ills of the present. Not all tribulations that befall the people from Guadeloupe and Martinique find their origin in the master/slave dichotomy. In fact, the excessive focus on the slave past leads to yet another kind of artificial enslavement. Victimized by the past, the people cannot overcome their dependency on the West and on Western portrayals of history. Trying to understand the sociohistorical phenomena leading to their present-day reality, the artists described in chapter 5 model a creative reappropriation of the past. These “prophetic visions of the past”—to use Edouard Glissant’s terms one more time—spread outward like rhizomes creating a dense mesh of interpretations. The exclusive projection of society’s ailments upon the slave past, on the other hand, might be likened to the unique root, seeking a singular origin to explain the failings of contemporary society. Such a narrow perspective disregards the broad spectrum of experiences comprising the French Caribbean heritage. It simply reenacts the one-sided portrayal of slave victims by the Western historical and artistic tradition.

It is in an effort to avoid this pitfall, to avoid victimizing slaves yet one more time that I studied the memory of slavery against the backdrop of embroiled eighteenth-century voices. It was not my aim to establish the origin of French Caribbean slavery and emancipation. I did not wish to write a diatribe against proponents of the slave regime or a eulogy for its opponents. By confronting dominant narratives with the silence of the past, remembered sources with forgotten documents, and triumphant memories with hidden shadows, I sought to capture memories of the past beyond commonly held beliefs about slavery and emancipation. This endeavor is finally punctuated by the creative voices of contemporary Guadeloupean and Martinican artists and writers. Their imaginative appropriation of the past opens a door to the future.



POSTSCRIPT

Since I initially completed this book in the fall of 2003 the debate surrounding the memory of slavery in France has far from subsided. Quite on the contrary, France's slave past has become a burning question not only for the descendants of slaves, but also for the French government and for the French public at large. Most notable in this regard is the *Comité pour la mémoire de l'esclavage* (Committee for the memory of slavery) appointed by the French government in accordance with the statutory order of 5 January 2004, which applies the law of 10 May 2001 qualifying slavery and the slave trade as crimes against humanity. In its first rapport handed over to the Prime Minister on 12 April 2005, the committee details the inadequate official treatment of slavery by the government as a major historical event, and as an integral part of the school curriculum. The committee makes a series of specific propositions to remedy these deficiencies including the choice of 10 May as an official date of national commemoration, the extensive incorporation of all aspects of slavery and the slave trade into the school curriculum, and the creation of research and cultural centers which integrate these hitherto marginalized issues into the national memory. The tardy acceptance by President Jacques Chirac on 30 January 2006 of the committee's proposal, and his pronouncement of 10 May as a national day commemorating the abolition of slavery, comes in the midst of fierce debate over the memory of the French colonial past. The nation at large has begun calling into question the inadequate memory of French colonization, thereby placing this marginalized past in the center of legal, political and cultural battles.

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