

≡ INTRODUCTION ≡

MEMORIES OF SLAVERY

On 27 April 1848, the Second Republic abolished slavery in its French overseas colonies thus ending three centuries of African slave trade and forced plantation labor. One hundred fifty years later the government of the Fifth Republic for the first time organized extensive official celebrations to commemorate this historic event. The past was resurrected, invading the present with countless memories—though undoubtedly not the same for the French nation and for the formerly enslaved populations in the overseas *départements* of Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana, and Reunion.¹

The governmental commemorations of April 1998 were varied and all took place in France. President Jacques Chirac gave an opening speech, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin honored the abolitionary fervor of the small village of Champagny, various ministers presented plaques commemorating important abolitionary figures and French Caribbean artists were invited for a variety of artistic performances. The overseas domains also organized their own local commemorative functions including exhibitions, conferences, and theater productions as well as the inauguration of memorials. In Martinique, for instance, scenes of the slave trade were reenacted with the arrival of a slave vessel, the unloading of slaves, and the reconstitution of a slave market. In Guadeloupe, a flame honoring the memory of the *nèg mawon* (fugitive slave) passed from township to township during the entire year preceding the 150th anniversary and was returned to its starting point amid celebrations, dances, and traditional music.

The most revealing aspects of the commemoration lie in the articles of major French and French Caribbean newspapers such as *Le Monde*, *Libération*, *Le Figaro*, and *France-Antilles* written for the occasion. French and Caribbean writers, historians, politicians, and journalists debated the issues surrounding the memory of slavery in contemporary society, taking positions both for and against the anniversary celebrations. Who and what should be commemorated? The 1848 decree declaring the emancipation of black slaves in France's colonies? The French men, most importantly of course French abolitionist Victor Schoelcher, who made the signing of this decree possible? The three centuries of slave trade and plantation slavery that ended in 1848? The daily resistance and countless rebellions of blacks that continually destabilized the system of exploitation, rendering it unfeasible and thus ultimately contributing to its demise? The heroes who led their people in these struggles for freedom: Makandal, Boukman, and Toussaint Louverture from Saint Domingue; Louis Delgrès from Martinique; and Ignace and Mulâtresse Solitude from Guadeloupe, to name a few?

How to Commemorate the Abolition of Slavery

"Remembering together" is the etymological meaning of "commemoration" as the Guadeloupean historian Oruno D. Lara points out in an article of *France-Antilles* (1998b).² This type of memory presupposes the existence of a community sharing the same common memory of the past. As far as slavery is concerned, however, the nation is divided into communities that do not share the same history, or even a similar vision of its significance. The descendants of slaves entertain a radically different relationship to the past than do the French, for many of whom the history of slavery is a discovery rather than a memory. Since the slave trade and plantation slavery are absent from the official school curriculum, many are unaware of the economic, political, and social realities of this period.³ As a result, the act of commemoration holds very different possibilities for the French and for French West Indians. For the former, 1848 can easily be reduced to a date symbolizing the accomplishments of the abolitionary movement, of the Second Republic, and of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. For the latter, the abolitionary decree is but one moment in a painful history they are often unable to face. The Guadeloupean historian René Bélénus (1998), who is fundamentally

against the idea of commemoration, calls this date a “non-event in Guadeloupe.” The abolition of slavery “is neither a man, nor a date, but a moment in history, a process,” which was bound to occur. Bélénus would have preferred a day in memory of the slaves. Guadeloupean writers, artists, priests, and union leaders in general asked that the commemoration not reduce their history to one date:

Commemorate, of course. Reveal the fruitful “triangular commerce,” which enriched France and her slave-trading ports. Reveal two centuries of barbarism covered up by the humanists, the Enlightenment, the Church.... And not to forget that the celebrated abolition was already the second one, since the first one, accorded by the Convention in 1794 was revoked amid a bloodbath. Finally reveal the uprooting, the traumatism, the search for an identity (Cojean 1998a).

Celebrating 1848 one hundred and fifty years later was far from problematic for the people of the French Caribbean who feared that their history would be forgotten yet one more time. They denounced, for instance, the silencing of the first abolition of slavery in 1794. Its revocation by Napoleon in 1802 had a profound impact on Caribbean history, since it contributed to the radicalization of the Haitian Revolution, eventually leading to Haitian independence in 1804.⁴

The debate provoked by the 150th anniversary of the abolitionary decree turned the commemoration into an unprecedented moment of cultural and historical reflection for France and for her remaining overseas domains. This polemic brought into focus the most controversial aspects of the past that continue to haunt the memory of slavery in the present. In his monumental *Realms of Memory*, the French historian Pierre Nora (1996: xvii) calls moments, places, people, or objects that symbolize a community’s memorial heritage “realms of memory.” These symbolic spaces become realms of memory when they are characterized by an overwhelming presence of the past (16). Submerging the present with diverse attitudes toward the nation’s slave past, the commemoration of 1848 is a realm of memory par excellence.

The articulation of this memory diverges considerably according to the historical standpoint assumed. From the official perspective of the government, the abolitionary decree was commemorated as a founding moment of the much-vaunted principles of equality, fraternity, and liberty. In his opening speech, President Chirac presented the abolition of slavery as

a building block of the nation: "The abolitionary process was undertaken in a spirit of integration, helping to strengthen the unity of the nation." Emancipated, the former slaves became members of the nation that had formerly enslaved them. The freedom bestowed upon them further strengthened the principles upon which the nation's unity was constructed: "By ending an iniquitous situation, the promoters of the abolition of slavery did not only act in the name of humanity. They reinforced the foundations of democracy and of the Republic" ("L'humanisme" 1998). From the official perspective, the commemorated moment does not conflict with the nation's principles of equality. Chirac glosses over the long historical period preceding 1848—three centuries of slavery. Abolition becomes an unproblematic moment of France's history that is part of the legacy of universal freedom.

Celebrating the abolitionary decree as a symbol of France's commitment to freedom and democracy, the commemoration honored contributions of French individuals to the exclusion of Caribbean initiatives. The festivities organized in the small village of Champagny are striking in this regard. In the company of five ministers, Prime Minister Jospin paid tribute to the anonymous citizens of the village who included a plea against slavery in their *Cahiers de doléances* (grievances) presented to the king in March 1789. The earliest indication of the French population's concern for the fate of slaves, this episode became a symbolic moment in the nation's "fight against servitude" ("Lionel Jospin" 1998). It was, in a sense, celebrated as a precursory sign of the abolitionist trajectory. The act of commemoration did not, however, acknowledge that not one other *Cahier de doléances* thought slavery worthy of mention. In fact, the exceptional nature of Champagny's plea draws attention to the population's complete lack of interest in slavery on the eve of the French Revolution, rather than to the beginnings of abolitionary fervor.

One of the earliest French figures to be remembered during the commemoration was the historian and philosopher Abbé Raynal. His polemical work *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, published during the last decades of the eighteenth century, presents European colonial expansion in a critical light. Certain inflammatory passages of this work are believed to have fueled slave revolts in the French Caribbean. "The slaves revolted as they brandished his work," wrote a journalist (Vézins 1998) in an article of *Le Figaro*. According to her, Raynal was

not only the hero of the revolted slaves, his work even inspired one of the most remarkable black leaders, Toussaint Louverture, whose bedside reading was nothing less than the *Histoire des deux Indes*. This provocative work, she held, “concentrates all the subversive seeds that could be found in the terrain of the Enlightenment.” By glorifying Raynal, the author of this article rendered the memory of the slave revolts themselves secondary. They are overshadowed by the vaunted image of the Abbé Raynal. The portrayal of the Enlightenment as the primary source of abolition is quite common in articles written during the commemoration (Paringaux 1998 and Vidal 1998).

Lara (1998a) condemns the quest to explain the events of the Caribbean through the prism of French history. Toussaint Louverture, according to him, was not “an illustration of the benefits of the Enlightenment.” Lara holds instead that the “start of a process of destruction of the system of slavery that propagates itself progressively throughout the Caribbean area” can be found in this geohistorical region as early as 1760. From the perspective of a historian who is critical of French historical thought, the 1998 commemoration sidestepped the powerful influence of Caribbean liberation movements.

In his monumental work, the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault calls for a writing of history that is not subjugated to authoritative power. In *Power/Knowledge* (1980: 78–92), for instance, he opposes unitary historical knowledge to what he calls subjugated, low-ranking, marginal knowledges that have been buried and disguised. Foucault’s writing project favors the struggle of these marginal knowledges against the coercive claims of a “true” knowledge. The abolition of slavery becomes part of a centralizing perspective of the past as long as the celebrated memory is limited to the glorification of France’s egalitarian accomplishments; the traumatic experience of slave laborers is marginalized by such a tunnel vision.

The Enlightenment and the French Revolution are not points in a continuum, symbolizing France’s linear progression toward fraternal nationhood. According to Nora (1996: 12–13), France’s vision of its rooted past must be replaced by an experience of history in terms of its discontinuity. It is within a fragmented universe that pieces of the past must be glued together in a reconstructive effort. Nora’s insight into the nation’s relationship to the past also applies to the colonial situation. The actions and narratives by Frenchmen and black slaves eventually ending institutionalized exploitation do not form a single, unitary logic, subjugated to what Foucault calls “true”

knowledge. The slaves' struggle for freedom is not a direct consequence of Montesquieu's, Diderot's, or Raynal's denunciations of the slave regime—it is not an ideological outgrowth of French thought: “history is nourished by a plurality of memories, a plurality of archives, and a diversity of documents” (Landi 1998).

A commemoration that does not restore the abolition within its context of slavery and colonialism, as the French historian Nelly Schmidt (1998) points out, not only fails to properly remember three hundred years of mass enslavement, it also ignores the vital component of the slaves' struggle for freedom. In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Foucault (1977: 219) argues that “popular movements ... are said to arise from famines, taxes, or unemployment; and they never appear as the result of a struggle for power, as if the masses could dream of a full stomach but never of exercising power. The history of this struggle for power and the manner in which power is exercised and maintained remain totally obscured.” The power of the middle class must always appear inaccessible to events such as popular uprisings that completely disappear within the continuity of the dominant power structure (221). Although slavery does not exactly reproduce the class system that Foucault is referring to, it is governed by an organization that engenders similar results. The slaves' struggle for freedom disturbs the power structure put in place by the colonizer. The collapse of this system is, as a result, primarily attributed to the voluntary actions of the colonizer, not to the power of slave rebellions. Slaves are not represented as “makers” of historical events: history, by definition, is made in France. This is why the Martinican writer Edouard Glissant (1981: 100) takes up his people's “non-history.” Unable to see themselves in a historical dynamic constituted by events of their own making, the people of the French Caribbean experience the past passively, as an absence (130, 278).

In their reactions to the 1998 commemoration, French Caribbean writers, historians, politicians, and journalists primarily emphasized the importance of remembering their slave heritage. In particular, they brought into focus the power of the slaves' struggle that made abolition inevitable. Alfred Marie-Jeanne, the president of both the Martinican Independentist Party and the Regional Council of Martinique, clearly distinguished the celebrations on his island from those organized in France: “we do not celebrate the abolition of slavery!

We commemorate the antislavery insurrection. There is a difference. The Negroes did not wait for a divine liberator from metropolitan France to lead the revolt. The slaves conquered their freedom on their own" (Cojean 1998b). Marie-Jeanne deemed it necessary to empower the slave ancestors by remembering their fight against French domination. The Guadeloupean writer Daniel Maximin (1998) similarly underscored the relevance of the slaves' struggle in the commemorative context. It is necessary "to establish the reality of the fights, the struggles, the resistance and thus prevent ... 1848 from being interpreted as a liberal bestowal by humanistic deputies to poor, enchained slaves who have no conscience. [This must be done] without the temptation of condescension." Commemorating the slaves' active, voluntary, and autonomous engagement in their own history restores a sense of dignity and pride by empowering the people.

The course of the flame of liberty in honor of the *nèg mawon inconnu* (the unknown fugitive slave) exemplifies how Guadeloupeans commemorated their slave heritage. Runners passed a flame from township to township throughout the entire island for the duration of one year, ending in the spring of 1998. The arrival of the flame in each town was celebrated with traditional music and drums to evoke the means of communication used by slaves. Considering fugitive slaves as the principle actors of the abolition of slavery, the organizers of this commemorative event wanted to honor the memory of all the fugitive slaves the American continent had known during the three hundred years of slavery ("Une pensée forte" 1998). The most important aspect of this event was its popular appeal. It was meant to touch the people and incite them to participate in this active remembrance of the past ("L'hommage" 1997). A symbol of the slaves' fight against oppression, the "unknown fugitive slave" is one of the only anchors allowing the masses to proudly identify with their heritage. The struggle of their ancestors gives the people of the Caribbean an active role in a history their people forged throughout three centuries of slavery. In *El Siglo de las Luces*, the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier beautifully conjures the power of the slaves' tradition of resistance: "If one were to make a spark correspond with each slave revolt, the American continent would constantly be flickering during the entire duration of Negro slavery" (qtd. in "L'hommage" 1997).

Memory and Forgetting

The West Indians' remembrance of their slave past is the central concern that emerges from the commemoration. Nonetheless, a "layer of silence" obstructs this memory (Cojean 1998a). With the abolition of slavery in 1848, the French Republic compelled the new citizens to forget their former enslavement (Cojean 1998b). Despite the numerous traces of slavery in their daily lives and in their mental makeup, the people had to forget a past replete with painful memories (Bélénus 1998). This systematic "silencing" of history, Glissant repeatedly points out in his *Discours antillais* (1981: 100, 130, 278), has erased the people's collective memory. And a people without memory are like a tree without roots, concluded Lucette Michaux-Chevry, president of the regional council of Guadeloupe, in her opening article of *France-Antilles: Supplément-Edition du 25 mai 1998* that was entirely dedicated to the commemoration.

The negation of history occurs not only in the context of slavery but also in that of colonialism in general as the Martinican psychiatrist, anticolonial writer, and activist Frantz Fanon (1991: 255–56) remarks in regards to Algeria. It is one of the determining characteristics of colonizers to wipe out all traces of the past prior to the period of colonization. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1996: 89) similarly shares his boyhood experiences as an Algerian Jew during which he saw the memory of his own community completely annulled and replaced by the history of the French nation. His handicapped memory, as he calls it, resulting from the amnesia he never had the courage and the force to resist, could only be remedied with the help of historical work he felt incapable of.

The memory of a people, according to Foucault (1976: 24–29), is the key to controlling their dynamism, their experience, and their knowledge of their struggles. This memory can be reprogrammed to contain a new framework that imposes upon the people an interpretation of the present. The Czech writer Milan Kundera (1980: 145, 234) observes this phenomenon in political relationships. Through organized forgetting, big powers deprive small countries of their national consciousness. As the people lose awareness of the past, they gradually lose themselves as a nation. After one hundred fifty years of controlled forgetting during which the former slaves were reprogrammed to see France as a generous, liberating mother, recollecting the past is a formidable challenge. The French West Indians' memory as a group is the key to this difficult process.

The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992: 182–83, 188) pioneered the concept of memory as a collective faculty. A group within a given society can reconstruct its past at any given moment by relying on the social memory of the group at large. However, society can only survive if there is sufficient unity among the different groups and individuals that comprise it. In order to achieve this unity, society erases from its memory those recollections that might separate groups and individuals too far from one another. The chosen recollections are rearranged in such a way as to reflect the consciousness that society has of itself in the present. Collective memory thus serves as a bridge between the store of recollections that provide a framework for the past and for the conditions in which society finds itself in the present. Once people or historical facts have permeated the memory of the group, they gain meaning as a teaching, a notion, or a symbol and become part of society's system of ideas.

When France abolished slavery for the second time in 1848, the new citizens of the colonies were to become entirely assimilated by a nation that adopted them as children. Incontestably, however, the distance separating the former slaves from the French could not have been greater. Nothing in the past united them and no common recollections could serve as a foundation for collective memory. Nonetheless, the unity for which the French Republic stood in the name of universalism had to be achieved. To this end, the recollections that were contrary to the ideal of equality, fraternity and liberty were to be systematically erased: the new citizens were to forget their enslavement under French dominion.

The Martinican historian Myriam Cottias (1998) speaks of the "politics of forgetting" in the article "La politique de l'oubli" of *France-Antilles: Supplément-Edition du 25 mai 1998*. Completely assimilated by the French Republic the colonies become part of an "imagined community" in the sense of political scientist Benedict Anderson. "In the name of political assimilation, the memory of slavery is forgotten so as to regenerate the colonies and integrate them into the nation." To successfully break with the past and with the memory of slavery, the Republic employed legal means. The new citizens were given family names they did not possess as slaves. An amnesty was declared in favor of the fugitive slaves who were asked to become members of a society that considered them as equal brothers. Finally, the instigators of rebellion prior to the announcement of the decree were officially pardoned by the State and a Mass was

celebrated to calm the passions. It is not only the institution of slavery that was to be forgotten but also the slaves' violent struggle against the French nation. The pardon that was to cement the unity of the French nation was, however, not reciprocal. There was no mutual agreement between the new citizens and the State that the past be buried; the Republic simply dictated the erasure of three centuries of slavery from the official historical record of the nation.

In his *Imagined Communities*, Anderson (1991: 199–201) discusses the importance of forgetting in the process of community building. Parallel to Halbwachs, Anderson maintains that those events in a nation that set communities off against one another, for instance, fratricidal wars, must be tacitly forgotten by all. Even so, this implicit agreement between the communities guarantees that on the occasion of a commemoration, for example, the forgotten events need only be recalled in order for the communities to share a common knowledge of this past. In the case of slavery, this unspoken acknowledgment never took place. Despite the nation's proclaimed ideals of equality, the assimilated new citizens were never on equal footing with the French. Deemed problematic by the State, their entire history was replaced by that of the French nation. As a result, the foundation for a collective memory shared by the French and by descendants from slavery was never laid.

The French historian Louis Sala-Molins (1998) illustrates France's selective memory regarding her past. The State commemorates the 1598 Edict of Nantes, which granted Protestants the right to exercise their religion, as well as its 1685 revocation with all its disastrous effects. The latter is a part of the nation's forgotten recollections of fratricidal wars, of which society needs to only occasionally be reminded. The year 1685 is also the year Louis XIV promulgated the *Code Noir*, the first European document giving a judicial structure to the slave regime. The catastrophic consequences of this event for thousands of black slaves need not be recounted here. Nonetheless, the French State has never deemed this date worthy of commemoration. Instead, argues Sala-Molins, it is the abolitionary decree that is celebrated to commemorate France's generosity and to forget the preceding horrors. France—and this is why French West Indians are highly suspicious of the 1998 commemoration—has never integrated her slave past into the nation's history. The absence of slavery and the slave trade from the school curriculum exemplifies this lack. "We must construct the memory of our children and give them reasons to be proud

of their slave ancestors,” urges a Guadeloupean politician (Coché 1998a). One of the obvious ways to do this, suggests *Tras’Mémoires*, an intercommunal committee from Guadeloupe working to foster the memory of slavery among the population, is to have chapters concerning slavery included in the Republic’s history textbooks (“Tras’Mémoires” 1998).

Reconstructing the past is, according to Halbwachs, the function of social memory. As a collectivity, West Indians can rely on the group’s memory to recall previous experiences. Yet, since this collective memory has always been silenced it must somehow be conjured up before it can point the way to the past. Nora (1996: 7) calls such summoned memories realms of memory that emerge as “moments of history are plucked out of the flow of history, then returned to it—no longer quite alive but not yet entirely dead, like shells left on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded.” The experience of slavery is plucked out of the historical consciousness of West Indians and becomes, to use Martinican writer Patrick Chamoiseau’s (1998b) expression, an “obscure memory.” In order to mobilize this painful past, to turn it into a realm of memory, to make it available for the collective memory of the people, slavery must become a part of “conscious memory.” Chamoiseau associates “obscure memory” with the West Indians’ difficulty in forming their own coherent community independently of France. He calls for a “collective catharsis” that would create such links and lead West Indian society to blossom (Chapelle 1998). To cease being the slaves of slavery, the people must experience a healthy memory of slavery, a memory that truly liberates (Chamoiseau 1998a).

“Prophetic Visions” of the Past

In this study, the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery serves as a point of articulation between present and past: between the commemoration of slavery in the context of 1998 and the historical process shaping these memories. A realm of memory for French and French Caribbean communities, the commemoration generated numerous commentaries on slavery and abolition. For the first time, recollections were officially brought out into the open as a consequence of the celebrations organized by the French government. Within the realm of the commemoration, the emblematic date of 1848—marking the Republic’s generous humanism—was dismantled

by the penetrating analyses of French and Caribbean historians, politicians, writers, and journalists. While the State celebrated 1848 as a symbol of progress, numerous voices in France and in France's overseas regions questioned the government's uncritical perspective.⁵

The period spanning the late Enlightenment and the French Revolution is crucial to the formation of the legacy of freedom and equality. In a surprising way, the memory of France's long-standing involvement in the slave trade is erased by the abolition of slavery in 1848. It appears as though France—the liberating “mother”—had never been responsible for the enslavement of thousands of African slaves. What caused this biased remembrance? The ideological underpinnings of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution are key to understanding this phenomenon. Powerful symbols of progress and social justice, the French *philosophes* largely contributed to the idea that the eighteenth century is at the origin of the nation's advances. They are considered the ideological fathers of the French Revolution, which in turn is thought to have brought about the destruction of the slave regime. However, in the process of remembering the *philosophes*, the French Revolution, and the abolition of slavery in 1848, the foundation of France's wealth on the slave economy is passed over in silence. Forgotten is also the Caribbean dimension of this past. Agents of this historical process, those who toiled for the economic benefit of France disappear behind European ideologies of freedom and equality.

An effective way to write about these forgotten memories is to bring forward the intricacies of eighteenth-century narratives on slavery in the political context of the French Revolution and slave resistance. Using memory as a link between past and present, this study examines focal points of the 1998 debate: enlightened thought, resistance, freedom, assimilation, and contemporary traces of slavery in the popular imagination. The five “realms of memory” are an inquiry into the historical and cultural process that gave rise to the memorial heritage of France and of the French Caribbean. They bring together some of the most divided perspectives, thereby allowing multiple voices of the past to be heard.⁶ This study is limited to the second part of the eighteenth century for practical reasons. Although a similar analysis of the first part of the nineteenth century until the famous decree abolishing slavery in 1848 would complement this investigation, it is beyond the scope of the present work.

I constituted the primary source material for the investigation of each realm of memory by voluntarily crossing the boundaries between human sciences. An extensive part of the sources include archives—the type of data typically used by historians. This work, however, is not a history of slavery. Instead, I use these documents in the framework of an interdisciplinary analysis. Most of the archival evidence consists of political pamphlets and letters by slaves, free coloreds,⁷ and white colonial planters as well as legal documents by colonial administrators and French officials written during the last decades of the eighteenth century. Through literary analyses, these texts are compared to writings by the French *philosophes* and to plays staging the colonial situation in the Caribbean during the Enlightenment. Other primary sources include printed texts by various antislavery activists, mostly members of the *Société des Amis des Noirs*⁸ as well as a number of court cases granting freedom to individual slaves. The eclectic body of sources comprised within each realm of memory brings out the ramifications of slavery and emancipation; even previously forgotten or obscured facets of this past come to light. This approach parallels Glissant's (1981: 133) vision of West Indian literary production today. Caribbean literature implicates all the human sciences as it nourishes, and is nourished by, historical reflection. This disregard for boundaries between categories of analytic thought allows elements of the past to be gleaned despite the silencing of the people's historical memory.⁹

The methodology is largely inspired by Glissant's theoretical exposition in *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (1996) on Caribbean literature, history, and culture. Aspects of Nora's and Foucault's theories complement this approach. The aim of this analysis is to take fully into account the specificity of historical formations amid former slave societies of the Caribbean. They do not—in contrast to European nations—have a genesis, upon which the founding myth of their communities can be built. To illustrate the opposition between European and Caribbean identity, Glissant (1996: 59) uses French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's and French psychoanalyst Félix Guattari's notions of the unique root and the rhizome.¹⁰ European and other occidental cultures have propagated the belief that all identity has one unique root to the exclusion of all other roots. This perspective is diametrically opposed to the experience of composite cultures, such as those of the Caribbean, which have emerged under very diverse ethnic, racial, historical, linguistic,

and cultural influences. The identity of the latter can more closely be compared to a rhizome that spreads outward and encounters other roots during its growth (Glissant 1996: 23).

For the purpose of this study, Glissant's schema is adapted to the formation of collective memory under the slave regime of the eighteenth century. Each realm of memory is made up of ideologies, texts, and actions that are transformed through their mutual encounters. I call this evidence of the past rhizome-memories, since they do not form a unique historical root that might anchor the present memory of slavery to an origin. Rather, like rhizomes, these testimonies of the past spread widely and are continuously exposed to the transformative influence of other testimonies. They form the building blocks of a realm of memory that can never be fixed. Nora (1996: 15) maintains that realms of memory "thrive only because of their capacity for change, [and] their ability to resurrect old meanings and generate new ones along with new and unforeseeable connections." Rhizome-memories expose the connections, making it possible to analyze how the multiple voices of the past mold the historical process. This methodology allows such conflicting voices as the slaves', the colonial planters', and the *philosophes*' to be studied within the same contextual framework.

In a discussion about research on prisons, Foucault (1980: 38) emphasizes the importance of studying not only the discourses about prisons but also all the discourses that arise within the prison, including the voices of the prisoners, of the guards, of the administration, and of the institution's regulations and means of functioning. These discourses have to be brought together by making visible the strategic connections between them. The world of plantation slavery is in many ways similar to the institution of the prison. There are numerous regulations, laws, voices, and actions both inside and outside of this world that influence its smooth functioning or lack thereof. While each one of these forces affects institutionalized slavery to varying degrees, it is the relationship between them that constructs the memory of those who are implicated in the system.

During the past two decades, scholars have gradually intensified their inquiry into this forgotten past. Although the aim of this book is to contribute to this endeavor, I am well aware of the many obstacles rendering the recovery of the past difficult. The rare testimonies by slaves and emancipated slaves of the French Caribbean are the main barrier for my own work.

While there is a relative abundance of narratives by North American and to some extent also English Caribbean slaves, relatively few such written traces have been left in Saint Domingue, Guadeloupe, and Martinique. This lack of sources made my original aim of exclusively representing the slaves' viewpoint simply unfeasible. However, I came across so many eighteenth-century commentaries on slavery during my research that I saw the greatest potential in the integration of all these voices within one study. Slaves, people of color, white planters, colonial administrators, the *philosophes*, the *Société des Amis des Noirs*, French lawyers, and fictive slaves from plays tell stories of the past that reflect the network of ideologies forging the historical process. Since such a comparative analysis entails the concurrent use of literary, historical, political, and judicial material, I have had to bring out the uniqueness of each of these documents while knitting them together in a coherent whole. Although I clearly distinguish between factual and fictional primary sources, my questioning of these documents is rather similar. How do these diverse fragments of the past shed light on obscured memories of slavery? By combining factual and fictional traces of the past, I create a cultural space that allows memories of slavery to surface. The goal is not to reconstruct the past as it happened, so to speak, and therefore to limit the study to factual evidence. Rather, it is the dialogue between fact and fiction, between past and present that sheds light on obscured, silenced, forgotten, and even erased fragments of the slave past. It is at the interstices of these documents that memory can be found. Again, the final quest of this study is memory, not the elaboration of a "true" knowledge of the past.

Again, Glissant (1996: 86–87) proves inspirational for the conceptualization of my approach. He formulates the idea of a "prophetic vision of the past" that narrates the past but is not exclusively based on factual evidence. According to him, "the past must not only be recomposed objectively (or even subjectively) by the historian, it must also be dreamt prophetically for the people, the communities and the cultures whose past has been occulted." To illustrate his point, Glissant evokes a chapter of his novel *Le quatrième siècle* in which he had imagined two French government officials attributing last names to the recently emancipated slaves by using terms they found in encyclopedias and anthologies. Some time after the publication of his novel, he found that this chapter had been used as a reference in a scientific journal that specialized in onomas-

tics: his literary invention had become a formal illustration of science. Glissant is convinced that systems of thought, as, for example, history, can no longer provide an exhaustive understanding of what is really taking place in the zones of contact and conflict between cultures. The recourse to imagination or to a prophetic vision provides insight where analytic systems of thought fail.

The cultural space of this study is inspired by Glissant's "prophetic vision of the past." Although I am not imagining the past like a creative writer, I am bringing together eclectic primary sources in an innovative way in order to expose memories left out by history. The cultural space is not produced by a system of thought but rather by a multiplicity of rhizome-memories, which through their contacts tell new and unpredictable stories of the past.

The contribution of this work to the field of studies on Caribbean slavery lies in the diversity of primary source material from the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, the interdisciplinary analysis of archival documents, and the cultural framing through memory. To my knowledge no such investigation—in particular concerning the French Caribbean—has yet been undertaken. At the crossroads of various disciplines, this investigation reveals connections between literary productions, political claims, historical events, and cultural phenomena that have generally gone unnoticed. Within this cultural space, this work does not record a chronological succession of events but rather a series of cultural impressions or snapshots bringing to life images of the past. The German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1969: 257) beautifully captures the ephemeral quality of the past as it is glimpsed in the present: "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again ... every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably." The fleeting quality of memory characterizes recollections of slavery. Fragments must be pieced together as images of the past flash up. This approach has the originality of reflecting Caribbean sociohistorical reality today—a reality emerging from what Chamoiseau (1998c) calls the people's "mosaic identity." The product of a cultural and historical heritage nourished by a range of racial, geographic, religious, artistic, and culinary roots, the peoples of the Caribbean reproduce the fragmentary nature of their past. By studying slavery as a cultural space of

rhizome-memories, I hope to respect the idiosyncrasy of French West Indian cultural tradition. It is my aim to propose a vision of the past that brings out the subtlety and depth of Caribbean history and culture. Although my vision is by no means “prophetic,” it does have the merit of offering a well-founded alternative to a Eurocentric view of the world.

While the body of my investigation is constituted by four chapters or realms of memory about the Enlightenment, the fifth realm of memory is a return to the memory of slavery in the present via the popular imagination of French West Indians. Chapter 1 investigates the ideology of universal freedom and equality through a comparative analysis of narratives on slavery by the *philosophes* and by the *encyclopédistes*, playwrights, white colonists, the royal court, and lawyers. By comparing the works of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, the Abbé Raynal, and Condorcet to other voices of the eighteenth century, I dismantle the causal relationship between the *philosophes* and French abolitionism. Scientific theories on race, letters and political pamphlets by colonial planters, memoirs by lawyers defending slaves in lawsuits against their masters, royal decrees regulating the control of slaves, and plays, all serve as counterpoints to the *philosophes*’ perspectives. By bringing into dialogue these diverse eighteenth-century writings on race, slavery, humanity, and freedom, I reveal the inconsistencies of an age that actively justified the enslavement of Africans while vaunting ideological and humanitarian progress. The juxtaposition of the *philosophes* and anti-abolitionists, in particular white colonial planters, decidedly calls into question the received notion that the *philosophes* constituted an uncompromising front against slavery. As many of the *philosophes*’ arguments found resonance among proponents of the slave regime and vice versa, the Enlightenment’s celebrated abolitionism becomes a crumbling edifice.

Constructed around the figure of the maroon, chapter 2 is an inquiry into the question of self-liberation. The phenomenon of *marronnage* is often neglected in official histories and excluded as an abolitionary force.¹¹ Consequently, the slaves’ agency within the system of slavery remains unacknowledged. The figure of the maroon is, however, one of the only anchor points allowing French West Indians to identify themselves as makers of their history; hence the recurrence of this theme during the commemoration in Guadeloupe and Martinique. Moreover, the voice of the maroon is largely present in eighteenth-century writings and colonists frequently addressed the pervasiveness

of *marronnage*. The realms of the maroon elaborated in this chapter are based on a nonrestrictive use of the term *marronnage*. Rather than limiting myself to the formation of maroon bands in the mountainous regions of the islands, I include all forms of slave opposition or resistance within these realms.¹² After an initial historical contextualization contrasted with the emergence of the profoundly mythical dimension of the maroon, the chapter examines two themes dominating eighteenth-century narratives. On one hand, maroons are depicted as brutishly violent actors against the slave regime. On the other hand, they are thought to be fundamentally “civilizable” due to their superior power and intelligence. They are seen as the building blocks of a cooperative agreement between white plantation owners and the black masses. Both portrayals undermine the Caribbean tradition of resistance, thus contributing to its marginalization.

Chapter 3 brings together three different visions of freedom during the revolutionary period. The *Société des Amis des Noirs*, colonial planters, and slaves both fueled and opposed the increasing momentum toward freedom by disseminating letters and political pamphlets in France and in her Caribbean colonies. Through a comparative literary analysis of these documents I study the ways in which these interest groups influenced one another and shaped revolutionary changes on both sides of the Atlantic. The causes underlying both the 1794 abolitionary decree and the intense outbreak of slave revolts throughout the Caribbean during the late 1780s and early 1790s is subject to considerable debate among historians. While some hold the French Revolution directly responsible for these events, others insist that the tradition of slave revolts far predated the upheavals of 1789. Rather than take position one way or another, I study the diverse notions of freedom—expressed by the *Société des Amis des Noirs*, the planters, and the slaves—born from these exceptional circumstances. Together, they brought the question of freedom to the forefront of political thought at the turn of the century. The juxtaposition of multiple voices reveals the central role played by slaves in the eventual destruction of the slave regime. Interpreting the discourses and actions that affected them, slaves forcefully projected their vision of freedom through writings and revolts; their influence on the course of events in the Caribbean made change inevitable.

Chapter 4 is a study of the transformations that the politically and socially oppressed free coloreds experienced as a

result of their new status as French citizens. In particular, it is the question of collective memory that is at stake in the evolving relationship to the mother country. The initial analysis is built on the arguments of race and class used by the people of color to vindicate their political rights. Their unique position as educated, wealthy slave and property owners gave the free coloreds a powerful economic status. Based on letters and political pamphlets by the free coloreds and white planters this chapter analyzes how race and class became stepping-stones for political representation. Once equality was granted in 1792, however, the free coloreds replaced their original demands for their due rights with expressions of overwhelming gratitude. The recurrent theme of assimilation exposes the powerful image of France as a source of liberty, equality, and fraternity even after three centuries of slavery. This new fraternal relationship, however, jeopardized the identity of the formerly oppressed since it required the active erasure of past injustices from their collective memory. The free coloreds' narrative on forgetting underscores the process of selective remembrance. The erasure of the past deplored today is in fact a phenomenon dating back to the last stages of the slave regime. Imposed by France, this attitude was also readily adopted by the formerly oppressed.

Chapter 5 is a result of fieldwork undertaken in Guadeloupe and Martinique to study contemporary traces of slavery in the popular imagination. The people's memory vividly exposes the continuing impact of enlightened thought, the omnipresence of the maroon as a symbol of liberation, the legacy of the French Revolution, and the consequences of assimilation. I apprehended the people's relationship to slavery through oral, material, and written manifestations of memory. Interviews with the local population, including historians and writers revealed the recent transformations in the people's perceptions, especially since the 150th commemoration of the abolition of slavery. The individuals interviewed deplored their compatriots' indifference to the slave past nourished by ignorance and denial. Nonetheless, they pointed to the current reappropriation of local history by the people as a positive sign that change was underway. This recent phenomenon can be observed in the numerous sites of memory erected during the past decade in Guadeloupe and Martinique. These include a large number of memorials recalling the horrors of the slave trade or honoring the legendary figure of the maroon. Murals depicting heroes and key episodes of French Caribbean history are among the

most graphic expressions of remembrance along with the politically charged symbol of the beheaded statue of Napoleon's wife Josephine, smeared with red paint. Eighteenth-century remains from the slave period complement this material memory. Ruins of sugar and coffee plantations, for instance, are invaluable sites of memory, especially when the slave quarters are still visible. Other such places include aqueducts, steps, and prisons constructed by slaves, as well as slave cemeteries. This material memory—illustrated with original black-and-white photographs—along with the inscriptions, legends, and captions describing these sites show how the people remember the past. From total absence of memory, to a passive awareness of the past and finally active claims to memory, popular imagination is simultaneously determined by a traditional perspective on history and awakened by new currents of consciousness. The encounter between the two gives rise to an unprecedented identification with Caribbean history and culture. Current political events parallel these changes. The May 2001 union worker strikes, aimed at instituting the date of the abolition of slavery as an official holiday, are an example of such activism. Other examples are the Martinican, Guadeloupean, and Guianese regional councils' attempt at redefining the political status of these overseas regions. In the cultural and political atmosphere of Guadeloupe and Martinique today, the eighteenth-century realms of memory have become quite alive again and invested with new meaning. Inspired by Guadeloupean writer Maryse Condé's *La Belle Créole* (2001), my concluding words suggest an outlook upon the past that constructively envisions the future.

Notes

1. "On March 19, 1946 the Constituent Assembly, precursor to the Fourth Republic, voted unanimously to transform the Caribbean 'Old Colonies' of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Guiana, along with the Indian Ocean colony of Réunion, into *départements* (the equivalent of US states) of France. The vote had been spearheaded by France's elected overseas representatives to Paris (most notably the Martinican deputy/writer Aimé Césaire) and carried the virtually unanimous support of the populations in the colonies" (Miles 2001: 45).
2. All translations from French are the author's.
3. I verified this claim by looking for references to slavery or to the abolition of slavery in various history textbooks used by the state

education system at the middle and high school level. The slave trade and the abolition of slavery were briefly mentioned in only one of four textbooks I consulted: *Histoire/Géographie-4e, nouveau programme* (Klein and Hugonie 1998). In the other three textbooks I found absolutely no references to slavery, the slave trade, or the abolition of slavery: *Histoire/Géographie-4e, nouveau programme* (Ivernel 1998); *Histoire-Seconde* (Lambin 1996); and *Histoire-Seconde* (Quétel 1996).

4. For more information on how the revocation of the first abolition of slavery influenced the course of events in Saint Domingue, see Fick (1990: 204–36) and James (1989: 289–377).
5. It would be compelling to similarly analyze France's official commemoration of the bicentennial of Toussaint Louverture's death on 7 April 1803. Louverture died as Napoleon's prisoner in the Château de Joux in the region of the Franche-Comté. France's national commemoration was supported by the Ministry of Culture, sponsored by UNESCO and supported by many Caribbean and African countries and personalities (Norton 2003).
6. See Nora (1996: XXIV) and Marc Ferro (qtd. in Durand 2001: 303) for the notion of writing a history in multiple voices.
7. Free coloreds were of mixed African and European descent. They were also referred to as people of color or mulattoes. Though the term mulatto refers to the offspring of a white and black parent, this appellation was used interchangeably with the other ones. Though for the most part the people of color were emancipated and many of them were wealthy property and slave owners, free coloreds as a group had no political rights whatsoever.
8. During its brief existence from 1788 to 1791, the *Société des Amis des Noirs*—founded by Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, an obscure public law specialist—gathered men and women from Parisian high society for the cause of freedom in France's slave colonies. It followed the model of the London Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, founded in 1787 by Thomas Clarkson.
9. See Fischer's (2004) recent interdisciplinary study of Haiti for a similar approach.
10. In one of the chapters of *Mille Plateaux* first published as a small volume under the title *Rhizomes*, Deleuze and Guattari establish a distinction between "root-thought" and "rhizome-thought." The unique root kills everything in its surroundings whereas the rhizome spreads out toward the encounter of other roots.
11. The French term *marronnage* denotes the act of running away from the plantation to become a fugitive slave or a maroon. Since there is no English equivalent, I will retain the French term.
12. My nonrestrictive use of the term maroon is inspired by Burton's work, *Le roman marron* (1997).