

“Les droits de l’homme’ in 1848: Women of Color and Emancipation”

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For this session on “liberté,” “égalité,” “fraternité,” I have chosen to talk about the special meaning that this republican motto took on in the years around 1848, the time when the second French republic was formed and when slaves were emancipated in the French colonies. More specifically, I want to focus on the relevance of one component of the republican triumvirate for the thousands of women of color—women slaves and free women of color—whose lives were most directly affected by the dramas of slavery and emancipation. I refer to “fraternité,” defined in a broad sense as the enduring sentiment of the ties binding all members of the human family. I want to argue that in contrast with the more abstract political notions of “liberté” or “égalité” that were central to the male public discourse of the republic, what is most salient when women speak out against slavery are appeals to sympathy and community that form part of a discourse of “fraternité.” That discourse, as I shall also attempt to show here, was not solely republican in nature. Rather, it arose from the larger humanitarian discourse of motherhood and religion that abolitionist women adopted in the nineteenth century.

Examples of that discourse can be found in women’s writings throughout the nineteenth century, as I have attempted to show elsewhere. To cite one especially illustrative example that dates from the period to be considered here, when in 1852 George Sand eulogized Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, her admiration centered on Stowe’s unique ability to reach out to slaves in a fraternal sentiment of pity, love, and respect. What Sand saw and acclaimed in Stowe’s writing were the fraternal values that Sand herself promoted during the democratic, evangelical phase of her career around 1848. Other examples of women’s use of the discourse of fraternity could be adduced from the literary record, but in this paper I want to focus instead on two letters by women, one dating from shortly before 1848 and the other shortly after that date. The reason for my choice of these non-literary examples is that scholars have so far unearthed very few examples in French such as these that record the voices of women of color from this period; and I think it is important to allow their voices to join the chorus of other women writers of the nineteenth century. By sketching out the context in which these letters were written and examining the discursive strategies they adopt, I hope to show that, although a more directly political component marks the letter written after 1848, both letters remain grounded in the discourse of fraternity adopted by anti-slavery women writers generally in the nineteenth century.

A first step in establishing the context for understanding these letters is acknowledging the inextricable ties linking emancipation generally to notions of the French republic and its revolutionary legacy. To rapidly review the facts, slavery in the French colonies was abolished during the first republic in 1794, restored by Napoleon in 1802, and only finally ended on April 27, 1848, two months and two days after the institution of the provisional government of the second republic headed by Alphonse Lamartine, who said: “Je signais la liberté des Noirs . . . Ma vie n’eût-elle que cette heure, je ne regretterais pas d’avoir vécu.” Lamartine’s proud statement notwithstanding, the final French emancipation began slowly and falteringly in the years following 1848. Problems loomed at the start when the decision was reached to delay the official

announcement of emancipation until August in order to harvest that year's sugar cane crop. As news about emancipation spread to the colonies in the weeks following April 27, discontent about the delay mounted and violence broke out in Martinique on May 20 and 22. To quell further uprisings, the governor yielded to the pressure exerted by the masses and, without authorization from metropolitan France, officially declared emancipation on May 23, with Guadeloupe following suit on May 28. From the outset, controversy surrounded the claim that France "granted" emancipation since there was a countervailing claim that the slaves themselves forced the French to grant it. Not surprisingly the dates in May, not April 27, are when emancipation is celebrated in the Francophone Caribbean islands.

This controversy notwithstanding, emancipation was viewed then and continues to be seen today as the victory of French republican ideals. To launch the exposition organized in 1998 on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of emancipation, Jean Tiberi, mayor of Paris, stated about abolition: "En permettant l'accès à la citoyenneté sans préjugés d'origine ni de couleur, dans la droite ligne des idéaux républicains, elle amorçait une longue marche vers une meilleure intégration, une juste reconnaissance, une garantie plus assurée de l'égalité des droits pour toutes les composantes de la société française." And whereas some of us might question Tiberi's idyllic picture of the second republic, knowing as we do that women were excluded from the "accès à la citoyenneté" that he claims was granted to everyone in 1848, the French public generally in France and the Caribbean, both white and black, continue to talk of republican ideals as forming the bedrock of the freedom and equality acquired at the time of emancipation. Also speaking in 1998, Henri Bangou, mayor of Pointe à Pitre, explains why. He points out that if emancipation and republican ideals have remained inextricably linked in the minds of persons of color it is because "l'irruption de la France (de l'entité France), dans l'imaginaire des esclaves noirs assujettis par les colons blancs, coïncida et s'identifia avec les idées républicaines de liberté et d'égalité, voire de fraternité, dans un univers où leur relégation dans une autre catégorie d'êtres vivants que celle des Blancs avait toujours été reçue comme un dogme."

Another more specific reason why republican ideals and emancipation remain inextricably linked, and one which has particular relevance for the question of women and antislavery, lies squarely in the person of the white abolitionist Victor Schoelcher, who rose to prominence in the second republic and who was revered by persons of color in the Caribbean as the author of the emancipation decree. His unwavering commitment to republican as well as abolitionist causes throughout his life further strengthened the identification of the two causes as inseparable, an identification that, according to Bangou, has lasted to this day in the minds of blacks and whites. It is important to add that Schoelcher defended the cause of women as well as slaves and has indeed been described as "one of the few sincere feminists of the nineteenth century." Not surprisingly, the nineteenth-century feminist writer Flora Tristan signed, "votre soeur en l'humanité" when she wrote to Schoelcher in 1843.

Having mentioned the ties between emancipation and republican ideals as well as having noted Schoelcher's association with the republic and his special importance for woman and anti-slavery causes, we can now turn to the first letter, one of hundreds of documents published in 1846 by Schoelcher in Histoire de l'esclavage pendant les deux dernières années, a compilation of newspaper articles calling for immediate emancipation and documenting the failure of the reforms instituted by the Mackau law of 1845, which included such supposedly ameliorative but ultimately ineffectual measures as improved religious instruction and greater

opportunities for self purchase by slaves. Many of the articles in Histoire de l'esclavage focused on stories of women's suffering, which Schoelcher foregrounded in order to gain sympathy for his abolitionist cause: women who were beaten while pregnant, who attempted suicide in desperation, who were forced to submit to their masters' sexual advances, and countless other instances of abuse. Whereas many journalistic texts that he included in Histoire de l'esclavage developed arguments and adduced facts to convince reader of the need for the immediate emancipation of slaves, other texts written by him or written by others and published by him focused on the personal side of slavery.

One such example is the first letter which, written in 1846 by a slave named Marie, is addressed to the queen of France. Marie's situation, which she explains to the queen in this letter, is that her mistress, who found herself in dire financial straits, imprisoned Marie's daughter, who was innocent of any wrongdoing, for the sole purpose of selling her to a foreign buyer. Presumably this would have enabled the mistress to obtain a higher price for the sale of her slave and, more importantly perhaps, to enact a transaction that would escape the attention of her creditors. Although Marie complained to the colonial authorities about the actions taken against her daughter, and was assured by them that her daughter would be returned to her, the mistress succeeded in having both Marie and her daughter imprisoned and sent off to Martinique. Having obtained no recourse from the local authorities, who typically paid lip service to the justice due to slaves, only to comply ultimately with the wishes of slave owners, Marie chose to appeal to the queen of France. According to Schoelcher her touching letter was widely read and admired in metropolitan France.

This letter illustrates the humanitarian and religious sentiments that form the basis of a discourse of "fraternité." Instead of making an appeal for freedom or equality, Marie appeals to a sentiment of community that she can, despite her lowly status, share with the queen as another woman and mother: "j'ai pensé que vous . . . écouteriez la prière d'une pauvre mère esclave que le malheur accable." Marie grounds this fraternal claim in a religious commonality they share: "Je m'appelle Marie"; "en priant la sainte Vierge ma patronne"; "vous, qui êtes puissante dans votre royaume de la terre comme elle dans le ciel"; "La bonne Vierge Marie écoute sans se lasser la prière des malheureux;" "vous qui êtes bonne comme elle, qui êtes mère comme elle l'a été, vous écouterez avec la même indulgence la mère esclave qui vient vous prier pour sa fille." Maternity and religion go hand in hand with "fraternité" here as in other women's writings of the time. Although the French republic is secular and Schoelcher was resolutely atheist himself, the evangelical language resorted to by Marie, Sand, or Stowe was an appropriate and accepted discourse for women that complemented and promoted republican ideals.

The second letter differs from the first in not having been published by Schoelcher; however, since its meaning and intent can be closely linked to him, it is likely that he played some role in its publication or dissemination. This letter, which dates from 1849 in the period immediately following emancipation, needs to be situated in the context of the elections by universal suffrage for representatives to the National Constituent Assembly that occurred after emancipation was decreed. Although women were excluded from voting, they nevertheless emerged as vocal participants in the debates between the opposing political parties of Schoelcher and Cyrille Bisette, a free person of color from Martinique. Although both had campaigned vigorously for emancipation, Bisette allied himself during the electoral campaigns with the colonists and, like them, prioritized the goals of a return to work and the maintenance of social order. His

constituency was strong in Martinique, whereas Schoelcher's popularity was preponderant in Guadeloupe. Soon camps designated as "schoelcheristes" or "bissettistes" were formed, with women proclaiming their adherence to one or the other camp through pamphlets, songs, organized social and religious activities, demonstrations, dress, even hair styles. In 1849 a "Société des femmes schoelcheristes de Fort-de-France" was created, and similar associations were formed in support of Bissette and other political candidates. Those groups wrote letters to the newspapers, circulated petitions, and engaged in a variety of other activities in the public sphere.

The elections were the occasion for the publication of "Appel à mes frères d'outremer," signed "D. Poléma, Négresse de la Martinique." Unlike Marie, Poléma has emerged into the public, political arena formerly reserved only for white men. The purpose of the letter is to exhort men of color to move forward, "en marchant toujours dans les mêmes principes avec ceux qui, en dépit de tous les obstacles, ont signé notre émancipation." Although Schoelcher is not named in the letter, inasmuch as he was the one who signed the emancipation decree there seems little doubt that it was intended to support his candidacy.

Now that emancipation has been declared, the notion of "fraternité" has become more specific: instead of all members of the human community the appeal voiced in this letter is directed to members of a community of persons of color. The male voters addressed in this letter are interpellated as brothers: "Martiniquais, Mes Frères," "mes chers frères," "N'oubliez pas, mes frères." The word "frère" appears nine times; the legendary Haitian leader Toussaint Louverture is evoked as a brother and called upon from beyond the grave to speak to black voters; Poléma acknowledges that the basis of her appeal is "la Fraternité." As an interesting aside from the historical record, it is worth mentioning that a white lawyer named Garnier reported that June 11, 1848 was the occasion of a "fête de la fraternité": "On a planté l'arbre de la fraternité, 50 négresses en robes blanches avec des bandes rouges et bleues et couvertes de dorures portaient des drapeaux et faisaient partie du cortège." This interesting event gives supports to the crucial importance of the notion of fraternity that emerges so distinctly from Poléma's letter.

Although Poléma also argues for "liberté" in this letter, she couches her argument in the same talk of motherhood and religion noted earlier in Marie's letter and Sand's writings on Stowe. The word "enfant" appears five times in this text, and it is as a mother that the republic is evoked: "la République, cette bonne mère, qui vient de briser nos fers." And it is also as a mother that Poléma warns that emancipation could be nullified, as it was in 1802, if the wrong candidates are elected. Freedom would then be denied to future generations: "que deviendraient alors nos malheureux enfants?"; "vous briseriez votre avenir et celui de vos infortunés enfants." Along with motherhood, religion sustains and supports Poléma's republican sentiments expressed in this letter. She evokes Christ as an exemplary model of the suffering endured by slaves and hails God as the absolute authority for the justice of the abolitionist cause.

Another important facet of the politics of "fraternité" in 1848 that serves as a context for this letter was the policy of "fusion," which was supported by liberal members of the white colonial community and mulattoes such as Bissette as a way to bring together whites and elite free persons of color, thereby setting a model for a gradual acceptance of social interaction among the races. Weddings between white men and mulatto women occurred, and elite women of color participated in taking up collections in church. Special importance was given to the act of white men holding the hands of women of color as a sign of respect and as a recognition of their new

liberated status. Pierre Dessalles, a white planter from Martinique, wrote: “Les rues sont pleines de nègres criant, hurlant, arrêtant les passants en les forçant à crier « Vive la République ! Vive la liberté ! » Les femmes surtout sont furibondes, il faut donner la main à toutes.” Holding the hand of a woman of color as a sign of fusion had particular importance because of the fact that before May 1848 such interracial contact was unthinkable; and indeed, one witness to the events refers to whites as late as June 1848 “qui se vantent ‘d’être restés vierges,’ c’est-à-dire de n’avoir pas encore serré la main aux gens de couleur.”

Poléma’s strategy is to defend her candidate as capable of assuring the enduring status of emancipation rather than merely supporting superficial signs of fusion. Thus she warns, “ceux pour qui vous avez ouvert vos coeurs au pardon et à l’oubli du passé, ceux-là ne fraterniseront jamais avec vous.” “Fraternité” then can be a ruse used against the innocent formerly enslaved people, who must be vigilant in withholding their trust from unreliable candidates: “Le jour où vous leur aurez confié notre destinée, ce jour-là, recommencera notre esclavage . . . aimons les hommes, c’est notre devoir; mais ne confions jamais notre destinée à ceux qui ne peuvent que nous tromper.” Not only does she predict that full social acceptance of blacks in white colonial society would never occur, which was certainly the case throughout the nineteenth century if not still today. She also warns her fellow countrymen to beware of politicians who, in the name of republican concepts and an ostensible commitment to “fraternité,” would deceive blacks and deny them their political rights in the future. This too sadly proved to be the case. With Louis Napoleon’s coup in 1851 and the establishment of the Second Empire direct parliamentary representation for the colonies came to an end.

To conclude, in my recounting here of the story of “liberté, égalité, fraternité” in 1848, I have cast Victor Schoelcher, republican and abolitionist, in a major enabling role in relation to the two women letter writers. That is not to say that key parts were not also played by many other writers, politicians, public and private individuals, men and women, white and black. Indeed Cyrille Bissette, Schoelcher’s adversary, was arguably a more persistent advocate of antislavery throughout the 1830s and 1840s than his white political rival. For my purposes, however, Schoelcher stands out as having played an especially proactive role with respect to women; and it is his achievement of having helped to amplify their otherwise muted voices that I have wanted to highlight here. One of the reasons why that achievement is so noteworthy is that it helps to fill a glaring omission in the history of French literature, in which there is no equivalent of what is known in American literature as slave narratives. As for the reason for that omission, the best explanation that I have been able to discover is that in France there were no enabling abolitionist institutions that promoted the publication of writings by former slaves as the Quakers and other religious groups did in the United States. It is thus worthy of note, I believe, that Schoelcher was directly or indirectly connected to the publication of texts such as the two letters examined here that made it possible to bring forth the voices of women of color in the period immediately preceding and following emancipation.