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Gisèle Pineau, *Femmes des Antilles*

I hear the words, the peals of laughter of Man Cia there in her forest, and I think about what it means that there is injustice in this world, and about those of us who are suffering, who are silently dying from slavery after it ended and was forgotten. I try, I try every night, and I just can't understand how it could all have started, how it could all have continued, how it could all still go on in our tormented, uncertain, tattered souls that will be our last prison.

--Simone Schwarz-Bart, Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle

Francophone Caribbean women writers have in recent years turned their attention to the question of women's role in the history of emancipation in the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, since 1946 overseas departments of France ("départements d'outre-mer"). To highlight their views and more fully acknowledge the fact that women were not merely victims or silent participants in the dramas of slavery and emancipation, this article compares the role of women at two key moments in the history of emancipation in the Francophone Caribbean. The first, the years around 1848, witnessed a series of public activities involving women related to the end of slavery in the French colonies. The second, the year 1998, was the occasion for events related to the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of emancipation and a series of attempts to interpret the meaning of emancipation for the diverse inhabitants of the Francophone world today. I argue that the way Caribbean women today interpret emancipation—in terms of dialogue and compromise rather than a confrontation between women's aspirations and masculine authority—bears significant similarities to the way women dealt with it in the years surrounding 1848. This suggests a contrast with the Anglo-American experience, more firmly embedded in a masculinist tradition. Indeed, the revered abolitionist Victor Schoelcher, the author of the emancipation decree, 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." This is not to say that Francophone women were not at the time of emancipation and are not still today victims of race, class, and gender bias, both in France and in the former French colonies. Nor is it to say that emancipation was not, then and now, understood in gendered terms. But those terms are particular to Francophone traditions and culture, as I shall attempt to demonstrate here.<sup>1</sup>

In the following remarks I begin with an analysis of the historical record from the years preceding and immediately following 1848 to show that gender formed the basis of a public dialogue regarding emancipated society in which women emerged as agents in the newly designed society. I then make a leap forward to the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of emancipation in 1998, at which time several Caribbean writers turned their attention to the role of women. What lies between 1848 and 1998? So little systematic historical work has been devoted to French

emancipation that it is still too early to know.<sup>2</sup> But works published in 1998 help to prepare the way by reviving fragments of the historical record and reminding us that women were a part of it. This article will focus on one such work, entitled Femmes des Antilles, Traces et Voix: Cent cinquante ans après l'abolition de l'esclavage and co-authored by Gisèle Pineau and Marie Abraham, both from Guadeloupe, which adopts the perspective of women and focuses exclusively on women's interpretations of the meaning of the periods of slavery and emancipation in the French colonies. My analysis of this contemporary text shows the important extent to which Pineau and Abraham's treatment of gender and emancipation echoes the conception of gender from the nineteenth century and embodies what I want to argue is a distinctively Francophone feminist process of dialogue and compromise between women's demands and male authority.<sup>3</sup>

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Slavery in the French colonies was abolished during the French revolution 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 republican government headed by Alphonse Lamartine, who said: "I authorized the freedom of blacks . . . If this had been the only hour of my life I would not regret having lived."<sup>4</sup> Lamartine's proud statement notwithstanding, the final French emancipation began non-definitively, progressing 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. Ill will was fostered by false, paternalistic statements at the time such as the following made by the governor of Guadeloupe on April 3, 1848: "Freedom will come, my children; you desire it. Your masters are the ones who have asked that it be granted." Black newspapers in the United States followed the events in the French colonies closely and were quick to inform their readers of the colonists' delaying tactics: "the decree in Martinique was not carried out promptly and in good faith—the negroes claimed their rights."<sup>5</sup>

The difficulties that arose during emancipation in 1848 were political, social, and economic in nature; and women were actively involved in the dialogue that occurred in all three of these domains. Women were surprisingly active in the political arena. Abolition was no sooner announced than election by universal suffrage for representatives to the National Constituent Assembly occurred; other elections were held over the next few years until Louis Napoleon's coup in 1851, which led to the establishment of the Second Empire and put an end to direct parliamentary representation for the colonies. Although women were excluded from voting, they nevertheless emerged as vocal participants in the debates between the opposing political parties

of Victor Schoelcher, a white French abolitionist, and Cyrille Bissette, a free person of color from Martinique. Although both had campaigned vigorously for emancipation, Bissette 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.<sup>6</sup>

The elections were the occasion for the publication of a letter entitled "A Call to my overseas brothers, to warn them against antirepublican elections" signed "D. Poléma, Négresse de la Martinique, Paris, le 27 Février 1849," one of the only existing documents that records the voice of a woman of color from the period of slavery and emancipation. Expressing the republican sentiments that were to remain inextricably linked to emancipation among persons of color, the author states, "the Republic, that good mother who has just broken our chains, wishes to complete her work; but you, my dear brothers, must help her by treading in the same steps as those who, despite all obstacles, signed our emancipation." Inasmuch as Schoelcher signed the emancipation decree, this text presumably served to promote his candidacy. However, as Nelly Schmidt has observed, "In the colonial electoral campaigns of 1848-1849, in looking at the arguments used by the candidates one notes a surprising similarity in the platforms of men who nevertheless espoused opposing positions. They all appealed to republican principles. They all claimed to be defenders of the interests of all opposing parties of the colonies' populations, in the name of 'social reconciliation' and 'forgetting the past,' which alone were perceived as capable of restoring 'order and work.'" Although Schoelcher was a radical republican while in Paris, where he belonged to the Montagne, in the colonies he and his electoral committees "spoke of order in almost the same way as his adversary Bissette, the ally of the colonists of Martinique."<sup>7</sup>

The political battles at the time of emancipation relied importantly on the political influence that women exerted in the public sphere, despite the fact that voting rights for women were not even raised as an issue at the time. Appearing publicly en masse in support of political candidates or administrative policies, they helped to express the needs and aspirations of the common people. Gilbert Pago observes that rural women became "the object of covetous desire on the part of opposing political interests. The brutality of the first electoral Caribbean campaigns demonstrates their importance as stakes in a climate of violent confrontations"; and he further observes that women of color continued to exercise unprecedented political agency in the public sphere throughout the period from 1848 to 1851. True, women were subordinate to the authority of male political figures. Thus although Poléma clearly plays a public, political role, she is conscious of the need to make the disclaimer of not wanting to offend her brothers' dignity by presuming that a woman should dictate their conduct, which of course is exactly what she is trying to do. It is also true that women pursued political agendas that were particular to the interests of their social group. Elite mulatto women, for example, often acted to further interests that were based as much on class as on gender or race. As Catherine Hall has observed, writing the history of women involves acknowledging that their "identities are constructed through a

complex articulation of the hierarchies of power associated with class, with gender, with ‘race’ and with ethnicity. Those articulations are never simple and are frequently in contradictory relations to each other.” Such was clearly the case when women entered the political arena in the years immediately following emancipation in the French colonies.<sup>8</sup>

In the social domain, women participated actively in forging compromise solutions to the myriad problems of a racist society. Black women congregated at markets or boat landings in search of political information; they danced in the streets, demanding that white men hold their hands as a sign of respect. For the mulatto class, hopes rested on a policy of “fusion” that would 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. Slowly it became apparent, however, that most colonists did not endorse emancipation and were unwilling to address the central issue of the perceived inferiority of blacks. Evidencing an insightful mistrust of the policy of fusion that Bissette and other free persons of color were promoting, Poléma warns, “Brothers, beware, yes, beware. Those for whom you have opened your hearts to forgiving and forgetting the past will never fraternize with you.” Racism and resistance on the part of the colonists remained unchanged. Indeed, it has been observed that, if problems have continued to plague the French Caribbean since the time of slavery, one of the main reasons is that abolition was “considered as an end in itself rather than as a determining stage in the process of the emancipation of blacks.”<sup>9</sup>

Two institutions that had been denied to blacks under slavery and that abolitionists considered the cornerstones of the future in the post-emancipation period—marriage and education—were not equally valued by women. Although Bissette traveled through the countryside to promote marriage and attend the weddings of former slaves, and although local administrators similarly exhorted former slaves to marry, habits of widespread concubinage did not change. For women who had in some cases been independent in Africa, where unions were based on clans and lineage, European-style marriage held little appeal. Moreover, “a husband and children may have seemed a supplementary burden in an already desperate situation.” In contrast, women had a strong desire to obtain education, which they saw as a means to better the fate of their children. Regrettably, the free, mandatory instruction from ages six to ten guaranteed by the emancipation decree of April 27, 1848 never came to pass. Even before emancipation, with the unenforced and thus largely meaningless Mackau law of 1845, slave children were supposed to receive education. However, the religious schools providing education in the French colonies—the Sisters of Saint-Joseph de Cluny for girls, the Brothers of Ploërmel for boys—were inadequate in number and prohibitive in cost for most of the population. Moreover, instances of racism within the ranks of the Sisters of Saint-Joseph, as documented by Schoelcher, call into question their ability and motivation in the task of educating newly emancipated girls. There was also often an unwillingness or inability on the part of planters and parents to release children from agricultural work. Not until the third republic did primary education become secular and generally available; and even then, in 1887, out of a population of 173,000 in Martinique, only 42,000 could read and write.<sup>10</sup>

In the economic domain, as in the social, problems resulting from the unsuccessful implementation of emancipation in 1848 had especially devastating effects on women. Inasmuch as their former masters controlled the economy and system of justice, the former slaves had little

choice but to work for their former masters and allow themselves to be exploited. Moreover, the indemnities paid to former owners widened the economic gap still further. Gradually most of the clauses of the 1848 decree that would have brought about real economic improvement as well as the other reforms that Schoelcher worked to institute—assistance for the elderly, orphans, and the disabled; loans and credit; work training—were weakened or ignored; only the abolition clause itself was implemented. One of the key issues for former slaves was the acquisition of the small plots of land (“*lopins de terre*”) necessary for subsistence and more time to cultivate their own land than they had had under slavery. This economic issue was especially crucial for women, who bore the prime responsibility for maintaining and nourishing the family. Another key issue was salaried work arrangements as opposed to the binding work contracts. Women were the most active among those protesting attempts by masters after emancipation to forcibly remove from their lands any persons who refused to sign binding work contracts. Having the freedom to work when and how they desired was especially important to women, who under slavery had managed to eke out a living through selling products from their gardens or manufactured objects such as pottery. In contrast with these more independent and productive economic endeavors, working in the sugar fields was disadvantageous for women, considered weaker and consequently paid less than men.<sup>11</sup>

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Largely forgotten and buried in the annals of history, often barely mentioned in history classes either in France or its former colonies, the period of 1848 received new life in 1998 through the efforts of numerous French and Caribbean public figures, writers, and historians who turned their attention to emancipation and looked to interpret its significance. In France, the tone tended to be celebratory. To launch the exposition organized for the occasion Jean Tiberi, mayor of Paris, presented emancipation as the victory of French republican ideals: “Abolition gave the enslaved overseas populations freedom and at the same time a country: France. By tracing a straight line between republican ideals and access to citizenship, without prejudice based on origin or color, abolition began the long march towards a fuller integration, a fairer place in society, and a safer guarantee of equal right for all elements of French society.” That women’s exclusion from that “access to citizenship” did not enter into this idyllic picture, either in France or the former colonies, is significantly overlooked in Tiberi’s remarks, as are the myriad ways in which emancipation failed to realize the republican goals after 1848. Also overlooking the troubled and conflicted legacy that emancipation left behind, another government official in charge of Overseas Affairs, Dominique Annicchiarico, stated that with abolition, “black people’s long calvary ended definitively and will forever be inscribed in marble.”<sup>12</sup>

One might have expected that in the Caribbean this talk of republican ideals would have been dismissed as Eurocentric and inaccurate, but surprisingly that was not wholly the case. There too, as it turns out, republican ideals were recognized as potent and respected bearers of historical and political meaning. Writing 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 “the eruption of France, as an entity, in the minds of black slaves subjugated by white colonialists, coincided and came to be

identified with the republican ideas of freedom and equality, and even fraternity, in a world which accepted as a dogma that slaves were relegated to another category of living creatures than whites.” Their trust in Schoelcher, who remained unwaveringly committed to republican as well as abolitionist causes throughout his life, further strengthened the identification of the two causes as inseparable which, according to Bangou, has lasted to this day in the minds of blacks and whites alike.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to reminding us that emancipation grew out of and continues to be marked by French republican ideals, 1998 also provides the basis of the parallel that I am drawing here between the important role played by women from the former French colonies in 1848 and today. Until recently, men and male-centered agendas dominated not only Caribbean society but historical studies of its past under slavery, which focused predominantly on the legendary heroism of Toussaint Louverture and other political and military leaders.<sup>14</sup> But a significant change appears to have occurred in 1998 through the efforts of a number of historians and literary figures who, writing from a Caribbean perspective, have chosen to focus on women during the periods of slavery and emancipation.<sup>15</sup> Femmes des Antilles, Traces et Voix: Cent cinquante ans après l’abolition de l’esclavage by Gisèle Pineau and Marie Abraham, which will be considered in detail below, is an especially significant example. Significantly, Femmes des Antilles focuses on Guadeloupe as well as Martinique, in contrast to Gilbert Pago’s Les Femmes et la liquidation de l’esclavage à la Martinique, 1848-1852, also published in 1998. For it is Guadeloupe that happens to be the Francophone Caribbean island where contemporary black and women writers such as Simone Schwarz-Bart and Maryse Condé have been successful in asserting their versions of creole identity. Their efforts were especially necessary to counteract the overvaluation in Francophone literature and history of masculine figures, not only military and political leaders, but legendary heroes such as the runaway maroons, who were primarily male. Another noteworthy Guadeloupian writer whose work bears special significance for Femmes des Antilles is Dany Bébel-Gisler, who has transcribed the life of a Guadeloupian peasant woman in Léonora: L’Histoire enfouie de la Guadeloupe. Adopting the distinctively Caribbean and Latin American genre of testimonio, Bébel-Gisler’s work “purposefully straddles divisions between fictional and nonfictional, between literary, historiographical, autobiographical, and social-scientific discourses” and “seeks to fill particular gaps in the official annals of Caribbean history by chronicling the everyday chores and struggles of its black population from the vantage point of a subject whose representativeness resides precisely in his or her lack of social and economic privilege.”<sup>16</sup>

Composed from the perspective of women and concerned exclusively with women’s stories during and after the periods of slavery and emancipation in the French colonies, Femmes des Antilles stands as an act of writing that can be compared to the many acts of writing such as discourses and pamphlets produced by actively engaged Francophone women in 1848. Like those earlier acts, this book seeks to influence its audience and effectuate change. Femmes des Antilles comprises testimonials by contemporary women, fictional testimonials of slave women, historical accounts of events, and actual historical documents from the period of slavery and emancipation. Pineau, who conceived the project, wrote the introduction, conclusion, and fictional testimonials. She also chose the contemporary women, some of whom wrote their own testimonials whereas others chose to be interviewed and allowed her to transcribe their stories. Abraham, a white French journalist identified in the book as having lived in Guadeloupe for ten

years, did the research for the book, provided the historical documents, and wrote the historical accounts. Abraham lives on a former plantation, l'Habitation Maud'huy, and, according to Pineau, has access to "the world of the former masters, which is still largely closed to blacks." Abraham has dedicated the book, significantly, to "the shadows of the past that still envelop the memory of the Maud'huy plantation." That dedication, she has stated, "is an homage to the women slaves who for me live in the memory of our plantation, the Maud'huy, a colonial master's house." The authors thus present 45 women's voices of different races, classes, ages, professions, and nationalities. In addition, the voices of numerous literary writers, including the Guadeloupien novelist Simone Schwarz-Bart, who appears with Pineau in one of the book's 38 photographs, are heard in the epigraphs to the various sections of the work.<sup>17</sup>

Written in a postcolonialist theoretical spirit, Femmes des Antilles eschews the authoritative tone and linear structure of Western discourse, presenting instead a patchwork of often conflicting voices that highlights the limits of the authors' (or anyone's) understanding of the infinitely complex subject of slavery. Pineau, presumably more an insider to Caribbean culture, seeks to render the interior vision of slave women, leaving the more "objective" historical accounts to Abraham. Neither voice is privileged, however. Rather, the movement among texts alerts readers to the danger of accepting any single authority from the competing voices of the women who speak in the book. For it is precisely the concept of the authority of a monolithic, objective voice that Pineau, like the Martinican novelist and theorist Edouard Glissant and other French Caribbean postcolonialist writers, associates with European values and traditions. To quote one of those novelists, Raphaël Confiant, "if whites can only say things one way, that's their business; blacks have several ways, and that's what has allowed them to survive to the present time."<sup>18</sup>

To show how women have survived and the ways in which their survival today parallels that of women during and after slavery—these are the recurrent themes and chief goals of Femmes des Antilles. Those goals are realized by the empowering acts of the women who recount their stories in this book as well as by the book itself as a whole. The authors' engagement is evident throughout the book, not only in what they say, but also in such matters of the selection, presentation, and placement of materials, including historical documents. Thus for example the authors amplify the presence of women in the past by including in their book five stories about women told by Schoelcher in Histoire de l'esclavage pendant les deux dernières années, a compilation of newspaper articles documenting the failure of the reforms instituted by the Mackau law of 1845, a gradualist plan for ending abuses by then widely acknowledged to exist in the French colonies. While the inclusion in the book of these materials is an acknowledgment of Schoelcher's role in emancipation, it is also an assertion of the ability of women writers today to give new meaning and purpose to these materials from the past. The first text contains announcements of sales of property, in which slaves are shockingly listed side by side with animals (127-28). The second concerns Apolline who, no longer able to endure constant beatings, took her life three short years before abolition (189-90). The third is a description by Abbé Dugoujon of the various kinds of torture inflicted on slaves, including women and children (203). The fourth consists of the transcript from a court case brought against two brothers who inflicted extreme cruelty on the slave Rosette and her children, one of whom died; the testimony of two slave women, Solitude and Angela, who witnessed the cruelty, was disallowed because they were slaves (206-08). The fifth draws upon a court case in 1842

resulting from the torture of a nine-year old girl, Thomassine, whose tormentor was acquitted when colonial doctors testified that the punishment inflicted on her wasn't excessive (241-42).<sup>19</sup>

Turning now to some of the social and economic issues this book raises, we need to listen first hand to the real and fictional women whose voices are heard in Pineau and Abraham's work. Subsequent to the description of those issues I want to argue that politically Femmes des Antilles constitutes a significant example of the intervention by women in Francophone Caribbean culture wars that in the years around 1998 have paralleled the pamphlets, demonstrations, and other acts by women during the debates surrounding emancipation in 1848. I want to argue further that this book constitutes a significant extension of the woman-centered writing that has existed for some time in the Francophone Caribbean but that Pineau and Abraham take in a new, feminist direction.

In the social arena women's activities have centered, as they did at the time of emancipation, on such key areas as marriage, education, and race relations. Marriage remains problematic, with only a few women reporting successful permanent relationships with Caribbean men. But the authors of the book take the position that what is most important for women at the present stage is consciousness about the difficulties of marriage and the relation that those difficulties bear to the past under slavery. Pineau and Abraham trace male feelings of disempowerment and emasculation back to the crossing, where men and women slaves were separated and women placed near officers and sailors (23); and they suggest that men translated those feelings into sexually promiscuous, macho behavior that masters encouraged in order to enrich the stock of slaves on their plantations. Many of the women who provide testimonials in Femmes des Antilles intervene on the important issue of marriage by establishing significant links between the past and the present with respect to Caribbean men. In the poignant words of the journalist and musician Marijosé Alie: "Sometimes I feel sorry for you—my father, my brother, my husband, my son—for being so hard on yourself, in such a hard world; for staggering through life rather than living it; for being obliged, unlike me, to carry the burden of the sugar plantations that every time tore you apart from your seed, your hands, your heart, to send you away, always to do someone else's work." (57) Jane Morton-Neimar told Pineau: "Guadeloupean women have really evolved; they know their rights and they no longer allow themselves to be passively dominated. But I must say, if women have evolved, men really haven't followed. In many ways they seem left behind, thrown by the new face of the Guadeloupean woman." (195)

Pineau and Abraham's book thus plays the kind of active, mediating role that women played in 1848, in this case giving voice to criticism of Caribbean men while at the same time expressing tolerance and compassion for the men who still today bear the weight of the legacy of slavery. Pineau displays understanding for mothers who unconsciously encourage machistic attitudes of male superiority over women in trying to give sons, "marked by history," some sense of pride (14). Other women acknowledge that as wives and lovers they tend to be overly indulgent of men's weaknesses and their need to assert authority over women. Although some dissenting opinions are expressed by the contemporary women who provide testimonials—Lucile's sisters married whites in France because they consider Caribbean men damaged beyond repair (171), and Emma claims that for women divorce constitutes the only true freedom (210)—the book as a whole highlights the efforts of women striving to achieve a balance between a modern sense of female assertiveness and a traditional sense of male authority, much as Poléma tried to do at the time of emancipation. I find it revealing in this regard that although

Femmes des Antilles is a thoroughly woman-centered work, which includes only the voices of women, male literary authority figures appear importantly in the epigraphs: Aimé Césaire, Langston Hughes, Léon Gontran Damas, Edouard Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau, and others. In a characteristically mediating spirit Pineau and Abraham thereby acknowledge their influence without allowing it to eclipse the independent voices and identities of women.

In a spirit dating back to emancipation, education also enters into the picture in Femmes des Antilles; but in this book it is self-education that the authors present as the key to how women can improve the oppressive conditions that weigh on themselves, their children, and their society in the postcolonial era. In many ways a didactic project, Pineau and Abraham seek in this work to bring to the attention of readers from both France and the Caribbean their colonial past, which often represents little more than a vaguely understood, remotely situated set of events presented in history books, if at all. In its accounts of historical events as well as the fictional testimonials that speak for slave women, the book emphasizes the special ways in which women suffered during slavery: for example, separation from their African mothers, rape during the crossing, and division from their children in the new world. Although Pineau's introduction stresses that the goal of the book is to portray women as survivors who passed down to their female heirs the ability to resist and the will to endure, the book also repeatedly emphasizes the extent of women's affliction, which was all the greater because they had to experience their own as well as their children's pain on a daily basis. Education about the past is especially important in the Francophone Caribbean because of the fact that once emancipation occurred, as noted earlier, Schoelcher, Bissette, and other political leaders promoted a policy of forgetting the past. And it is precisely because of the lasting effects of that policy that Pineau and Abraham seek to influence a broad French-speaking audience to abandon the collective amnesia that has surrounded the subject of slavery in the Francophone world and to recognize that their national identity includes their past under colonialism. As Jocelyne Béroard said to Pineau, "I'm not ashamed of the past. I would just like the French to know this story so that they can have a true vision of the Antilles, of Caribbean men and women, whose descendants were reduced to slavery." (257) An unwillingness to acknowledge the past under slavery is not limited to France, however. The policy of forgetting the past that was generally adhered to in schools and other arenas until the 1960s has left its mark on Caribbeans too. Femmes des Antilles urges them to acknowledge past suffering that at some deep-seated level should bind them together in the present. In the introduction, Pineau explains that she strives to bring out of the dungeon of oblivion those slave women who are the great-great-grandmothers of the majority of Caribbean women today. As the subtitle suggests, the book seeks to allow those women from the past to walk in the footsteps ("traces") of the women who have come after them and join their voices ("voix") with those of women today. (12-13)

With respect to the closely linked factors of class and race, Femmes des Antilles similarly seeks to educate its readers regarding the need for meaningful integration of women at all levels of society. In 1848, as we saw earlier, women sought to meet that need in ways such as taking up collections in churches or celebrating marriages between white men and mulatto women. Pineau and Abraham instead promote the more feminist strategies of consciousness raising and solidarity among women. Femmes des Antilles presents the case that all women in the Caribbean were oppressed, urging them to acknowledge their common suffering, and most importantly their resistance to persecution in the past, as a basis for their identity and their solidarity in the present.

To begin with privileged white women, a conscious effort is made not to neglect the hardships that they also experienced during the period of slavery. The book emphasizes the fact that privileged women were and still are today often enslaved by brutal husbands within the walls of their own homes. In a fictional testimonial, Anne states, “I listened every day to Madame’s sorrows” (34). And in a fictional testimonial that focuses on a cruel white mistress, Emeline admits that her willingness to sleep with her master provoked her mistress’ cruelty; and she contrasts her mistress with numerous others who were close to their slaves, gave them clothes, talked and laughed with them, held their children in their arms, and “acknowledged that black women were women too.” (243) After Emeline’s story Pineau and Abraham have placed remarks from the present from a white woman, Nelly, who can’t understand why blacks are so distant and difficult to communicate with: while expressing a desire for whites and blacks to know each other better and be more open about underlying issues, she dismisses the past as something for which she bears no responsibility. Having chosen to include Nelly’s willful amnesia, the authors then leave it to their readers to draw the conclusion that communication is impossible without a willingness by all Caribbeans to incorporate the past under slavery into the formation of their identity in the present (247-48). Overall, however, the book expresses optimism regarding relations among persons of different classes and races. Marie-Noëlle Recoque, a white woman living in Guadeloupe, affirms the possibility for all Caribbean women today to form a hybrid identity (116-19); and Françoise Eynaud, married to a white man and living in Guadeloupe, evokes the freedom that women now enjoy to laugh at color distinctions (252-53).

Regarding privileged mulatto women, *Femmes des Antilles* actively promotes conciliation, refraining from placing blame on them for the Caribbean’s troubled racial past because of their privileged status. The book traces the existence of mulattoes in colonial society back to the crossing; we hear the voice of the legendary Solitude, who states: “my yellow skin as a mulatto woman signified nothing more than that my mother was raped” (224). Pineau and Abraham’s book makes clear, however, that Solitude’s rejection of her white father’s blood was not and is still not today the rule in the Francophone Caribbean islands, where race and class remain inextricably interwoven. In a fictional testimonial reflecting the mentality of the privileged female house slave who engendered mulatto children, Honorine expresses satisfaction with the sexual favors she provided to her white master and with the social and economic advantages she derived from their relationship when slavery was abolished. For her, emancipation was not a complete break or cause for great celebration: “Can I really say that I was a slave? I don’t think so . . . It was a bad time for blacks but whites were in the same predicament.” (167) Marie-Tyrane tells how she was favored by her mother because she had light skin [“la peau sauvée”] (144); and Pauline blames her mother “for having made me so black” (78), taking pride in her own daughter’s lighter skin. Numerous women demonstrate lucidity and courage by admitting the fact that Guadeloupians and Martinicans of all races treat black, lower-class Haitians and Dominicans working today in Guadeloupe and Martinique with much of the same disdain that the French displayed toward slaves in colonial society. Racism directed at Haitians is all the more tragic since Haiti served as a model for black freedom throughout the world at the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, despite the evidence that classism and racism persist in postcolonial Caribbean society among privileged mulattoes, Pineau and Abraham are no more willing to target them as racist than to single out white women or men. If racism persists, the book contends, the reasons lie in the unexamined legacy of slavery

and the failure of the society as a whole to examine its relation to the past.

In the economic domain, the contemporary women whose voices are heard in Femmes des Antilles are outspoken critics of current conditions, as were women in 1848. The teacher Lita Dahomay recounts how as late as the 1960s, when she was involved in activist causes, the lives of the poor differed little from conditions under slavery, with sugar cane workers living in huts without light or water and having to maintain a garden to sustain themselves. (154-55) Julétane concludes that all a woman can do in Martinique today is get pregnant, wait for a man, or work as a servant or in the cane fields (111-15); Emma has the courage to tell her story of abuse (209-10) and Sergine of incest (211-13); Gloria, a Haitian, tells us that she is payed half of what a Guadeloupian makes for work on the banana plantation (227). Other conditions, while echoing earlier forms of oppression, arise more specifically from the migration to the cities that occurred in the decades after emancipation. The poor women of color in urban settings who speak in Femmes des Antilles display heightened consciousness by presenting these conditions as analogous to earlier conditions under slavery: E... speaks from within prison walls about poverty and absentee fathers (71-76); Betty tries to deal with her son's enslavement by drugs and the ills of urban society (80-81); Célia compares her madness to the slaves' ordeal (95).

The women who speak out on economic issues in Femmes des Antilles often address the highly conflicted issue of remaining on the island or leaving to work in France; and it is worth mentioning the wide range of opinions they express on this issue. Despite the differences among them, all of these women bear testimony to the strength and diversity of women's survival strategies in the post-emancipation period. Olga, proud to be a French government employee, claims France as her country, not Martinique (39-40); Michelle, the young daughter of assimilated parents, only knows France but dreams of her grandmother on the island (44-45); Francelise Dawkins, who was born in France, recounts the racism she encountered in France from both the French and Caribbeans (100-01); Julétane loves France and deplores the gossip, jealousy, suspicion, superstition, and insularity of the islands (111-15). For the mother of the actress Firmine Richard, moving to France and becoming a government worker was, as for many other poor, single parents, a matter of upward mobility (121-23). Suzanne, working hard on a banana plantation, takes pride in supporting herself and her family without accepting government assistance (148). For Sergine, the shop she got from her godmother Edwige is not only a source of great pride but her vindication for the abuse and neglect inflicted on her since her childhood by men (211-13). As these stories illustrate, the tangled threads of race, class, and gender are impossible to separate today. Poor women flee the islands because of abuse or absentee fathers but also because of class aspirations. They may have experienced racism in France or in the Caribbean, but they may also have racist attitudes toward blacks, whites, or mulattoes. As a whole, the book appears to endorse the commitment to remaining in the Caribbean, as Pineau suggests in the introduction when she evokes women, after emancipation, "falling in love with this land of shame. And little by little, from mother to daughter, they regained the face of their dignity" (12). But at no time does this pride of place translate into a direct call for Caribbean nationalism or the assertion of a return either to the Caribbean or Africa as necessary for reclaiming a foundational Caribbean identity. Women who leave and women who stay are equally part of the African/European/Caribbean diaspora that Femmes des Antilles strives to embrace and include.

In the political domain, Femmes des Antilles enters the fray of Francophone Caribbean

culture wars that have some of the same importance in 1998 that electoral campaigns had in 1848. As in those campaigns, acts of spoken and written discourse by women have the potential to play an important role; and it is this potential that Pineau and Abraham's book seeks to exploit. To understand their intervention in the current debates, however, we need in closing to situate this work in relation to French postcolonialist theories which, although they supply its conceptual framework, lack the feminist thrust that I believe this work provides.

As French Caribbean writers today like Pineau and Abraham try to negotiate intersecting ethnicities and develop complex formulations of hybrid identity, they inevitably participate in the ongoing debates surrounding the assertion of an exclusively African identity in the earlier "negritude" movement, which began in the 1930s and continued through the 1950s. The goals of negritude included celebrating black achievement, acknowledging common African roots unifying black experience worldwide, and raising black consciousness about past and present forms of victimization and oppression. Frantz Fanon's Peau noire, masques blancs (1952) argues that blacks have interiorized white cultural notions and have the same collective unconscious as whites; and although not an affirmation of negritude, Fanon's work represented a related and highly influential effort to bring about liberation through its probing analysis of the psychological bases of inferiority perceived by blacks.<sup>20</sup>

The shift away from negritude has moved through a number of stages that resonate within the pages of Pineau and Abraham's work. From the 1960s to the present time, Edouard Glissant has worked to deconstruct negritude's presumed search for "authentic" African roots, for which he substitutes a more nuanced literary and creative search for origins and identities. That search necessitates ending the amnesia surrounding the past under slavery and interrogating the colonial past in order to create identities that, while arising from a bond with the physical reality of the Caribbean land, make no claim to possessing a firm, foundational status. In Poétique de la relation and other works Glissant has replaced the essentialized notion of negritude with a relational Caribbean identity, in which diverse cultural traditions come together in a fluid process of constantly changing social, racial, and ethnic interactions. Postcolonial subjectivity for Glissant arises within a globalized, worldwide context, producing identities that are open, constantly mobile, and never pure.<sup>21</sup>

In the past decade, the creolist Martinican writers Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant have taken Glissant's postcolonial theories in new directions. Their notion of créolité, less fluid than Glissant's, posits an identity formed by the coming together of specifically African, European, and Caribbean components, in much the same way that those components come together in creole language, which these writers promote and consistently incorporate into their use of the French language. In contrast to Glissant, whose work is characterized by a highly theoretical and often obscure, hermetic use of language, these creolist writers adopt a more direct, positive, and less deconstructive approach to notions of creole identity. In their well-known essay "In Praise of Creoleness," they talk of expressing "what we are," of producing "a truer art," of "our authenticity" and "interior vision," all of which suggest the kind of willingness to affirm a foundational identity that is the target of Glissant's deconstructive postcolonial critique. Indeed, Glissant and other critics have accused the creolists of going down an essentialist path that ultimately leads back to the way of thinking that produced negritude. For their part, the creolists reject the theoretical, abstruse plane on which Glissant has placed Francophone postcolonialist debates. Speaking specifically of Glissant's works from

before 1975, although in words that to some extent apply to his writing generally, the authors of “In Praise of Creoleness” state, “Glissant himself did not really help us, being taken by his own work, by his own rhythm, and persuaded that he is writing for future generations. We received his texts like hieroglyphics in which we were able somehow to perceive the quivering of a voice, the oxygen of a perspective.”<sup>22</sup>

Femmes des Antilles appears to follow the creolist lead in its willingness to affirm an authentic, in this case feminine, Caribbean identity. In one testimonial, Sylviane Telchid links that authentic identity to the use of creole which, as noted earlier, is a key component of the creolist agenda. To deny the use of creole, she states, is to deny “the whole innermost Guadeloupien self”; for her, as for the creolists, “creole is the language that lets me be me.” (199) Beyond the specific use of creole language, there are other indications that Femmes des Antilles accepts the notions of truth and authenticity that Glissant has continued to subject to deconstructive scrutiny, but that now the creolists tend to approach in a different, more reconstructive mode. In remarks quoted earlier, Jocelyne Béroard speaks of wanting to convey “a true vision of the Antilles” (257); and Pineau herself has stated that she chose the women whose voices are heard in the book “above all in terms of their ability to speak the truth.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly the fictional testimonials Pineau provides are clearly intended to convey an authentic interior vision of women of the past. Pineau and Abraham’s work strives to present, in short, real women of the past and present, full subjects capable of making their voices heard in the world. Theoretical issues of essentialism take second place to more direct, pragmatic needs that exist in the Caribbean, including the need to develop a feminist agenda.

The extent to which Femmes des Antilles represents a feminist project can perhaps best be seen through comparison. As we have seen, it is a woman-centered work that gives voice and agency to women of all races and classes in the French Caribbean. In this it differs from Pago’s Les Femmes et la liquidation de l’esclavage à la Martinique, 1848-1852. An insightful detailing of issues affecting Francophone women during the period of emancipation, Pago’s work adheres nonetheless to the traditional procedure of revoicing the experiences of women rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. Femmes des Antilles also differs from the works of writers who have put the spotlight on well-known or legendary women of the past such as the Guadeloupien heroine Solitude, relying not only on historical records but traditional story telling and oral history.<sup>24</sup> Following the lead of Bébel-Gisler in Léonora, Pineau and Abraham have chosen to focus on average women and the formation of their hybrid Caribbean identities in the often competing domains of work and family. By not confining their efforts to proposing heroic models of women from the past, they can reach out more effectively to a broad range of women in the present.

Most importantly perhaps Femmes des Antilles differs from other Francophone Caribbean works in aiming actively to promote unity among women through fostering a consciousness of their relation to the past under slavery and their common ties with the suffering of their foremothers. Femmes des Antilles is a consciousness-raising project focused on liberating women in the present by providing the means for their coming to grips with the past. As the fictional slave Bétani states, “If I speak out today it’s in order to join voices with my sisters. I’ve found the courage to say these few words that free me from the fear and liberate me from the hatred that I carried in my heart.”(49) Part of the task of joining voices with other women entails directly confronting the racial divisions that exist among Caribbean women and

bringing white women into the fold, as Pineau and Abraham have done through their collaboration. That project is important, as Hall observes, for “rethinking the future, imagining white identities which are not rooted in a sense of imperial power and of superiority but in a recognition of difference.” It has been said that the creolists, whom Pineau and Abraham appear to follow in many respects in *Femmes des Antilles*, are apolitical, proposing only psychological and aesthetic solutions to real world problems in the French postcolonial world today. Whether or not that is true for the creolists remains to be seen, but it is definitely not true for Pineau and Abraham, who directly promote changes that will affect women in their personal and political lives. The result of greater awareness and solidarity, the book suggests, will be improved social, economic, cultural as well as psychological conditions for women.<sup>25</sup>

The debates in the past and the present described in this article ultimately provide a frame for understanding gender, slavery, and emancipation in the Francophone Caribbean. In the past, bitter electoral campaigns pitted Bissette, who was favored by whites and mulattos in Martinique, against Schoelcher, who was preferred by blacks in Guadeloupe and who vigorously pursued feminist causes. As we have seen, women participated in the public arena during those debates. Today, the debates continue. Like Bissette, male writers from Martinique (Glissant and the creolists) tend to exercise more influence among French and international audiences than do female writers of color from Guadeloupe (Schwarz-Bart, Condé, Bébel-Gisler, and Pineau). And like Schoelcher, women writers from Guadeloupe are the ones who have brought attention to the condition of women. It is not just a matter of women writers being more sympathetic to women’s issues than male writers. With respect to the creolists, A. James Arnold has in fact leveled charges against them ranging from gender insensitivity to out and out sexism. Pineau and Abraham have entered the fray of these modern debates in the same active and conciliatory spirit as did women in the nineteenth century. Following the path for valorizing women’s history already traced by Schwarz-Bart, Condé, and Bébel-Gisler, Pineau and Abraham have set themselves the task of providing the point of view of women in accounts of slavery and emancipation. In doing so they have set a feminist model for writing a history of slavery and emancipation that focuses on women of color without excluding either white women or men, that highlights class differences without stereotyping or stigmatizing social groups, and that promotes the formation of an inclusive Francophone Caribbean identity without downplaying the past and present conflicts that render that identity difficult to achieve.<sup>26</sup>

NOTES

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1. Janine Alexandre-Debray, Victor Schoelcher ou la mystique d'un athée (Paris: Perrin, 1983), 138. In this article the terms "French colonies," "Francophone Caribbean," "Francophone," and "Caribbean" are used interchangeably, for convenience, to refer to Guadeloupe and Martinique, the subjects of my study; and "France" is used to refer to metropolitan France, despite the fact that Guadeloupe and Martinique are parts of France.
  2. Lawrence C. Jennings states regarding French emancipation that "no aspect of the vast history of abolitionism has been so neglected by scholars treating either the anti-slave trade or anti-slavery movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries." French Anti-Slavery: The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802-1848 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), vii.
  3. Giselle Pineau and Marie Abraham, Femmes des Antilles: Traces et Voix. Cent cinquante ans après l'abolition (Paris: Stock, 1999), 220. All subsequent references to this work will appear in parentheses in the text.
  4. Liliane Chauleau, La Vie quotidienne aux antilles françaises au temps de Victor Schoelcher (Paris: Hachette, 1979), 36. Janine Alexandre-Debray observes that Lamartine's statement echoed similar remarks made by William Wilberforce shortly before his death when emancipation was declared in England on July 28, 1838: Victor Schoelcher ou la mystique d'un athée (Paris: Perrin, 1983), 104. Schoelcher called emancipation "the greatest honor that I received in my life": Henri Bangou, A Propos du Cent Cinquantenaire de l'abolition de l'esclavage (Guadeloupe: Ibis Rouge, 1998), 78.
  5. Chauleau, La Vie quotidienne, 38, 76, 18; Nelly Schmidt, Victor Schoelcher et l'abolition de l'esclavage (Paris: Fayard, 1994), 109, 138; Bangou, A Propos du Cent Cinquantenaire, 62; Abolition de l'esclavage: mythes et réalités créoles (Paris: Centre Culturel du Panthéon, 1998), 7; Alexandre-Debray, Victor Schoelcher ou la mystique d'un athée, 129; The National Era, August 3, 1848.
  6. Schmidt, Victor Schoelcher, 123-25, 132; Chauleau, La Vie quotidienne, 80; Pago, Les Femmes, 93-94, 159-87.
  7. D. Poléma, Appel à mes frères d'outremer, February 27, 1849 (BNF LK12-1005); Schmidt, Victor Schoelcher, 123, 125.
  8. Schmidt, Victor Schoelcher, 123; Pago, Les Femmes, 159; Catherine Hall, "Gender Politics and Imperial Politics: Rethinking the Histories of Empire," in Verene Sheperd, Bridget Brereton, and Barbara Bailey, ed., Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective (London: Ian Randle, 1995), 52.
  9. Pago, Les Femmes, 81-91, 113-17; Poléma, Appel à mes frères; Mickaëlla Perina, Citoyenneté et sujétion aux antilles francophones (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 23.

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10. Marie-Noële Denis, “Enfants naturels et concubins en Guadeloupe et en Martinique: la mémoire de l’esclavage,” in Esclavage, résistances et abolitions, ed. Marcel Dorigny (Paris: Editions du CTHS, 1999), 455-68; Chauleau, La Vie quotidienne, 247, 281-86; Victor Schoelcher, Histoire de l’esclavage pendant les deux dernières années (Paris, 1847), 174-76; Jean-Michel Deveau, Femmes esclaves: d’hier à aujourd’hui (Paris: France Empire, 1998), 131-34.
11. Perina, Citoyenneté et sujetion, 19-27; Pago, Les Femmes antillaises, 17, 137-58; Léo Élisabeth, “Rémunération du travail libre et question agraire à la Martinique et dans les colonies françaises d’Amérique de 1842 à 1851,” in Esclavage, résistances et abolitions, 305-16.
12. Abolition de l’esclavage: mythes et réalités créoles, 7, 10.
13. Bangou, A Propos du Cent Cinquantenaire de l’abolition de l’esclavage, 112, 114.
14. One notable exception written before the period of 1998 is Arlette Gautier’s Les Soeurs de solitude (Paris: Editions Caribéennes, 1985), which focuses exclusively on the condition of women under slavery in the French colonies. This work is absent, significantly, from the extensive bibliography of works on French slavery and emancipation provided in Jennings’ French Anti-Slavery, as is any other mention of the role of women.
15. Jean-Michel Deveau, Femmes esclaves: d’hier à aujourd’hui (Paris: France Empire, 1998); Gilbert Pago, Les Femmes et la liquidation du système esclavagiste à la Martinique 1848-1852 (Guadeloupe: Ibis Rouge, 1998).
16. Maryse Condé, Moi Tituba...sorcière noire de Salem (Paris: Mercure de France, 1986) and La Parole des femmes: essai sur des romancières des Antilles de langue française (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1979); Simone Schwarz-Bart, Homage à la femme noire (Editions consulaires); Dany Bébel-Gisler, Léonora: l’histoire enfouie de la Guadeloupe (Paris: Seghers, 1985); Vera M. Kutzinski and Cynthia Mesh-Ferguson, “Afterword: Convergences.” Leonora, The Buried Story of Guadeloupe, by Dany Bébel-Gisler (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985), 269, 272-73.
17. I quote from letters sent to me by Gisèle Pineau on December 12, 1999 and by Marie Abraham on April 24, 2000. I am grateful to them for their willingness to answer my questions about their respective roles and aims in writing the book.
18. Roy Chandler Caldwell, Jr., “‘Créolité’ and Postcoloniality in Raphaël Confiant’s L’Allée des Soupirs,” French Review 73, 2 (1999), 304, 307; Raphaël Confiant, L’Allée des soupirs (Paris: Grasset, 1994), 98.
19. Victor Schoelcher, Histoire de l’esclavage pendant les deux dernières années (Paris, 1847). The first four texts appear in volume 1 (429ff, 462, 183-84, and 297-323); the fifth text appears in volume 2 (440-41).

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20. Aimé Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, translated by Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972); Clarisse Zimra, “Négritude in the Feminine Mode: The Case of Martinique and Guadeloupe,” in The Journal of Ethnic Studies 12, 1 (1984): 53-77.
21. Celia M. Britton, Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1999), 1-34.
22. Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, Eloge de la créolité, translated by Mohammed B. Taleb-Khyar, Callaloo 13 (1990), 886-909; Chris Bongie, Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literature (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), 63-66.
23. This remark was made in the letter that Pineau wrote to me.
24. André Schwarz-Bart, La Mulâtresse Solitude (Paris: Seuil, 1972); Maryse Condé, An Tan revolysion: Elle court, elle court la liberté (Pointe-à-Pitre: Conseil Régional de la Guadeloupe, 1989).
25. Hall, “Gender Politics and Imperial Politics,” 49; Caldwell, “‘Créolité’ and Postcoloniality,” 308-09.
26. Alexandre-Debray, Victor Schoelcher ou la mystique d’un athée, 106-07, 138, 187-89; A. James Arnold, “From the Problematic Maroon to a Woman-Centered Creole Project in the Literature of the French West Indies,” in Doris Y. Kadish, ed. Slavery in the Caribbean Francophone World (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 164-75.