Suite française
rivista di cultura e politica

n. 8/2025
Débâcle
pp. 217-247
ISSN: 2611-9757
DOI: 10.13131/unipi/wy22-r213

Her Body, Their Virtue: The Black Female Figure of Abolition in French Memorial Culture

Sophia Khadraoui-Fortune

In metropolitan France, public memorials to slavery and its abolition emerged only in the early 2000s, often featuring Black female figures that reveal the intersection of colonial memory and gender dynamics. This article examines how these figures embody both the legacies of colonialism and patriarchy and the resilience and agency of women. Two contrasting commemorative trends emerge. Some monuments, like *Solitude* (Bagneux, 2007), *Héloïse* (Fontenay-sous-Bois, 2008), and *Supplique* (Argenteuil, 2011), depict the enslaved Black woman as an allegorical figure, disconnected from historical realities, while others, such as *Modeste Testas* (Bordeaux, 2019) and *Solitude* (Paris, 2022), celebrate historical agency, tentatively rehabilitating their struggles for freedom. Drawing on postcolonial, gender, and memory studies, I argue that these statues, by crystallizing the tension between invisibilization and recognition, reflect a belated memorialization that remains a gynocentric, often instrumentalized commemoration, undermining reparation toward a conceivable collective redemption.

Keywords: *Memory – Monuments – Abolition – Slavery – Black Women*

1. Introduction

Claire Heureuse, Henriette Saint-Marc, Marthe-Rose dite Toto, Solitude, Sanite Bélair, Modeste Testas, Adélaïde Tablon, Jeanne Odo, Héva, Victoria Montou[1]. These names offer merely a glimpse of the countless women who lived, suffered,

[1] Fondation pour la Mémoire de l'Esclavage, *Lieux de Mémoire et d'Histoire*, memoire-esclavage.org, Web.

Sophia Khadraoui-Fortune – Californian Lutheran University – skfortune@callutheran.edu

survived, or died under slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries in French colonies such as Saint-Domingue, Guadeloupe, Guyane, and La Réunion. What connects these historical figures is not only a shared experience of enslavement and colonial violence, but the marginalization that has long shaped their remembrance.

Long obscured by the weight of dominant historical narratives and patriarchal forgetting, their names remain peripheral, echoing in some scholarly works thanks to a growing body of research on enslaved Black women[2], occasionally invoked in artistic projects, yet largely absent from monuments and collective memory in metropolitan France. With great difficulty, they are slowly resurfacing from the depths of a traumatic past, a painstaking, collective labor of remembrance carried out by historians, activists, and associations working to excavate and piece together their stories, confronting both the silences of the past and the selective memory of the present. Yet, even as some begin to be acknowledged, their return remains fragile. Myriad others linger as ghosts in the shadows, "shadow heroines" whose everyday acts of defiance, care, and resilience have been buried.

Within continental France's commemorative landscape, Black women occupy a paradoxical position: persistently invisible as historical agents, yet hyper-visible as symbolic figures. This tension reveals the contradictions embedded in national memorial practices, where symbolic inclusion often masks historical erasure. Such visibility rarely entails transformative reckoning or meaningful reparative acknowledgment within public consciousness.

This paradox becomes evident when examining the limited number of public monuments commemorating the abolition of slavery in the metropole: fewer than twenty exist (excluding steles), with nearly half depicting the figure of a Black woman[3]. The remainder consists mostly of motifs such as masks, chains, and shackles, with a few depicting Toussaint Louverture[4]. This disproportionate reliance on the Black female form as a commemorative symbol raises questions about gender, race, and the ideological labor performed by these representations in France's national memoryscape. Why, then, are women so prominently featured in the

[2] S.M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 2004; A. Gautier, *Les Soeurs de solitude. La condition féminine dans l'esclavage aux Antilles, du XVIIe au XIXe siècle*, Paris, Éditions caribéennes, 1985; C. Vidal, *Femmes et genre dans les historiographies sur les sociétés avec esclavage (Caraïbes anglaise et française, XVIIe-mi-XIXe siècle)*, in «Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire», 50/2019, pp. 189-210; N.E. Marvin and S.J.Zimmerman, *Gender and Slavery in Global Contexts: Lessons from Historiographies of Africa and its Diasporas*, in «Esclavages & Post-esclavages», 9/2024, journals.openedition.org, Web.

[3] Monuments not foregrounding white figures like Victor Schoelcher. Fondation pour la Mémoire de l'Esclavage, *Lieux de Mémoire et d'Histoire*, memoire-esclavage.org, Web.

[4] *Ibidem*.

commemoration of slavery and its abolition? What drives the recurrent turn to the female figure and what kind of female figure is being constructed? What role does she play in the metropolitan processes of memorialization? What narratives does her presence evoke, and what tensions or silences does it obscure or disarm?

Feminist theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Gayatri Spivak have argued that while identity categories like «woman» and «Black woman» operate as forms of «strategic essentialism»[5], a temporary and politically tactical consolidation that are instrumental in advancing collective demands, they must remain subject to critique and deconstruction. In *Black Bodies, White Bodies*, Sander Gilman asserts that artistic iconography often eclipses the individual, assigning them to an imagined category that becomes a fixed point of comparison[6]. Through such typologies, society processes and classifies individuals while crystallizing, codifying, and perpetuating racialized and gendered stereotypes, reducing complex identities to simplified and repeatable visual codes. As Gilman notes «they serve to focus the viewer's attention on the relationship between the portrayed individual and the general qualities ascribed to the class»[7]. Within this artificially constructed, homogenizing framework, the "Black woman," situated at the nexus of racial and gendered subjugation, belongs to a recurring, fantasized visual repertoire centered on the figure of the enslaved woman. These gynocentric memorials to the abolition of slavery, then, should be read not merely as neutral acts of remembrance, but as politically charged constructs and sites integral to the symbolic logics of both colonial domination and its postcolonial commemoration, enacted through the selective and strategic figuration of Black womanhood.

Because monumental representation inevitably entails symbolic condensation, the question is not whether these figures "ideally" represent the anti-slavery Black female militant, but how they embody the abolition of slavery and how the agency of Black female figures is mediated, fragmented, selectively emphasized, or suppressed in public monuments. These figures are far from empty signifiers; rather, their meanings are often shaped and constrained by dominant national narratives that privilege benevolence and reconciliation over resistance and agency. My aim is not to propose a "correct" depiction (such as the armed rebel), but to interrogate the commemorative choices that elevate certain traits while erasing others.

---

[5] G.C. Spivak, *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography*, in D. Landry - G. MacLean (eds) *The Spivak Reader. Selected works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, New York-London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 203-235.

[6] S.L. Gilman, *Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature*, in «Critical Inquiry», 12 (1)/1985, pp. 204-242.

[7] *Ivi*, p.1.

Agency, in the context of slavery, should be understood as a spectrum of resistance strategies, ranging from militant to maternal, from collective to individual, from direct confrontation to survivalist cunning. Alongside armed rebellion, sabotage, and marronnage, many subtle, everyday acts of dissidence revealed other forms of agency from verbal protest and strategic silence to feigning illness, maternal protection, reproductive control, clandestine literacy and music, and cultural preservation.[8] These practices and many others, though varied in visibility and intensity, constituted assertions of autonomy, survival, and defiance within an oppressive system.

Amidst these tensions and conflicting dynamics, this article examines how twenty-first-century metropolitan monuments to the abolition of slavery, while ostensibly celebrating freedom and emancipation, often reproduce the very colonial and patriarchal ideologies they claim to transcend. At the center of this paradox stands the recurring figure of the Black woman, often anonymous, allegorical, infantilized, and sexualized. I argue that, rather than restoring their multilayered agency, these statues repeatedly strip away Black women's identities, flatten their resistance, essentialize their complex lived experiences, and aestheticize their suffering.

Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework that weaves feminist and postcolonial theory with semiotic analysis, this article interrogates French memorial culture by examining the aesthetic, spatial, and ideological dimensions of five public monuments selected to capture the spectrum of symbolic and historical representations of Black women across metropolitan France.

The analysis unfolds in two parts. Following a contextualization of France's contemporary memory landscape, the first section examines *Solitude*[9] (Bagneux, 2007), *Héloïse*[10] (Fontenay-sous-Bois, 2008), and *Supplique*[11] (Argenteuil, 2011), all located in the ethnically diverse suburbs of Paris in the Île-de-France region. This gendered and racialized construction of memory instrumentalizes Black women as sanitized symbols of sacrifice and maternal endurance, embodying national ideals of liberty, innocence, and redemption, while simultaneously denying them historical specificity and agency. The result is a persistent disjuncture between symbolic representation and genuine recognition. The gynocentric framing of slavery and its abolition mirrors the broader historical trajectory of the enslaved woman's subjugation, her body serving as a site of both coerced labor and systemic sexual

[8] Camp, *Closer to Freedom* cit.; Gautier, *Les Soeurs de solitude* cit.
[9] N. Alquin, *Solitude*, Sculpture, Bagneux, 2007.
[10] M. Cardon, *Héloïse ou… la fille des Trois-Rivières*, Sculpture, Fontenay-sous-Bois, 2008.
[11] W. Castaño, *Supplique*, Sculpture, Argenteuil, 2011.

exploitation. What emerges is a dual fallacy: a paternalistic commemorative logic that transfers moral credit to the oppressor by framing emancipation as a gift bestowed rather than a right seized; and a lingering colonial nostalgia that resists a full severing from the ideological remnants of the *mission civilisatrice*. Through this symbolic *mise-en-scène*, the Black female body, still caught in the colonial gaze, becomes the stage upon which France, recast as a benevolent liberator, projects its moral virtue and humanist ideals. In this idealized redemptive narrative, she serves as a vessel for France's ethical greatness.

The second section turns to recent figurative artistic works, such as *Modeste Testas*[12] (Bordeaux, 2019) and *Solitude*[13] (Paris, 2022). These pieces celebrate historical figures attempting to depart from long-standing tropes of control and objectification. Yet, some remain entangled in frameworks still shadowed by symbolic erasure, limiting Black women's voices and representational depth, and casting doubt on the sincerity of France's engagement with its colonial past.

Ultimately, with these case studies, this article contends that remembrance in metropolitan France functions less as a substantive, reparative act of historical justice than a site of moral projection and soft domination, displacing rather than confronting its enduring imperial legacies. By tracing the shifting iconographies from allegory to subjecthood, this analysis seeks to uncover the ideological work of national mythmaking performed by some of these monuments and the political stakes of remembering (or misremembering) Black women in the French public sphere.

2. Memory Laws in France

Monuments commemorating the abolition of slavery in continental France began to appear in 1998, spurred by the 150th anniversary of the 1848 decree that permanently abolished slavery in the French colonies. While this milestone provided a formal occasion for commemoration, it was largely driven by sustained grassroots activism from Afro-Caribbean and African diasporic associations and organizations (such as the influential *Les Anneaux de la Mémoire* created in 1991 in Nantes), which demanded that the legacy of slavery and the slave trade be acknowledged in the national narrative, laying the groundwork for the commemorative projects that followed in the early 2000s.

[12] W. Caymitte, known as Filipo, *Modeste Testas*, Sculpture, Bordeaux, 2019.
[13] D. Audrat, *Solitude*, Sculpture, Paris, 2022.

A pivotal development came with the *Loi Taubira*, enacted on May 21, 2001, and named after its architect, French Guianese politician Christiane Taubira[14]. The groundbreaking law recognized slavery and the transatlantic slave trade as crimes against humanity, creating a legal and moral framework for national engagement with this past. It mandated inclusion in school curricula (still limited), promoted commemorative efforts[15] (still sparse and inconsistent)[16], and established the *Comité pour la Mémoire de l'Esclavage* (CPME) in 2004.[17] Since 2006, following a CPME recommendation, May 10 marks the National Day of Remembrance for the Slave Trade, Slavery, and Their Abolitions in metropolitan France, commemorating the anniversary of the Taubira Law's vote[18]. All sculptures discussed here were inaugurated on that date.

Meanwhile, public debates over memory, national identity, and postcolonial justice continue to stir controversy. The *Loi Taubira* thus stands as both a reparative milestone and a stark reminder of the unresolved tensions surrounding France's colonial legacy.

The ongoing urgency for recognition, representation, and reparation was further underscored by the *loi mémorielle du 23 février 2005*, particularly its controversial Article 4, which called for school curricula to recognize «the positive role» of French colonialism, especially in North Africa[19]. The clause provoked widespread condemnation from historians, educators, scholars, and civil society, who viewed it as an attempt to whitewash colonial violence[20]. Although repealed a year later[21], its brief enactment revealed a persistent national reluctance to confront colonial legacies, exposing a cultural landscape where latent racism festers, colonial nostalgia thrives, and France clings to a romanticized vision of the *mission civilisatrice* as a virtuous endeavor[22]. This episode reveals the nation's ambivalent stance, oscillating

[14] M. Cottias, *Les vingt ans de la loi Taubira: Expériences, politiques et citoyenneté: un bilan*, in «Cahiers d'Histoire», 151/2021, pp. 167-178.

[15] Articles 1, 2, and 4 of «Loi n° 2001-434 du 21 mai 2001 tendant à la reconnaissance de la traite et de l'esclavage en tant que crime contre l'humanité», legifrance.gouv.fr, Web.

[16] O. Grenouilleau, *Les identités traumatiques: Traites, esclavage, colonisation*, in «Le Débat», 136 (4)/2005, pp. 93-107.

[17] M. Cottias, *Rapport d'activité pour le mandat 2009-2012 du Comité pour la mémoire et l'histoire de l'esclavage*, November 15, 2013, vie-publique.fr, Web.

[18] F. Vergès, *Le Comité pour la mémoire de l'esclavage*, in «Cités», 25 (1)/2006, pp. 167-169.

[19] «Loi n° 2005-158 du 23 février 2005 portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés. Version Initiale 2005», legifrance.gouv.fr, Web.

[20] N. Bancel, *France, 2005: A postcolonial turning point*, in «French Cultural Studies», 24 (2)/2013, pp. 208-218.

[21] Article 4 was abrogated by Decree n° 2006-160 of 15 February 2006.

[22] N. Bancel and P. Blanchard, *Mémoires coloniales conflictuelles*, in «Socio», 19/2024, pp. 109-131.

between condemnation and glorification of its traumatic past, unable or unwilling to fully transcend this liminal state.

This ambivalence was not confined to the legislative arena but also played out in the streets, making 2005 a politically and socially explosive year marked by the rise of minoritized voices. The uprising that erupted in the *banlieues* of Paris and other major cities following the deaths of two adolescents in Clichy-sous-Bois[23] brought to the surface the deep structural inequalities, police brutality, and systemic marginalization of racialized youth in France's urban peripheries[24]. Amid these heightened racial tensions, three major organizations (*Les Indigènes de la République*, the CRAN (*Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires de France*)[25], and *Devoirs de mémoires*[26], emerged, amplifying the voices demanding justice. This period signaled a decisive rupture with silence, consolidating a new wave of racial justice activism that challenges the myth of universalism and demands a reimagining of national belonging, one that fully embraces the republic's plural and postcolonial identities.

3. 2020, When Memory Shattered

The death of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020, ignited a global reckoning with racism, policing, and historical memory. As protests erupted across the United States and beyond, the *Black Lives Matter* movement gained renewed momentum. In various cities across the globe, thousands rose and took to the streets to express their outrage, not only against contemporary police brutality but also against the enduring legacies of imperial domination inscribed in the public landscape. This movement inspired a wave of iconoclastic actions targeting monuments seen to glorify colonialism, slavery, and racial dominance[27].

France was not exempt: in cities such as Paris, Marseille, Bordeaux, and Montpellier, protesters challenged the public veneration of imperial figures like Joseph Gallieni, Hubert Lyautey, and Jean-Baptiste Colbert, architect of the 1685

[23] *Nicolas Sarkozy en 2005: Le terme 'nettoyer au Kärcher' est un terme qui s'impose*, Institut National de L'Audiovisuel, INA.fr, January 6, 2022. Web.

[24] V. Cicchelli - O. Galland - J. De Maillard - S. Misset, *Retour sur les violences urbaines de l'automne 2005*, in «Horizons stratégiques», 38 (1)/2007, pp. 98-119.

[25] A. Célestine, *French Caribbean Organizations and the 'Black Question' in France*, in «African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal», 4 (2)/2011, pp. 131-144.

[26] F.J. Piednoir - M. Ahounou, *Le collectif 'Devoirs de mémoires' veut éveiller les consciences politiques*, in "France 2", ina.fr, December 12, 2005, Web.

[27] A. Von Tunzelmann, *Fallen Idols: Twelve Statues That Made History*. NY, Harper, 2021.

Code Noir, whose statue outside the National Assembly was defaced with red paint to symbolize the blood of enslaved Africans, and tagged with the phrase «Négrophobie d'État» (*State Negrophobia*), directly indicting the State's role in perpetuating anti-Black racism.[28] On June 14, 2020, President Macron responded unequivocally; «The Republic will not erase any trace or name from its history. The Republic will not take down any statue»[29]. Back in Martinique, activists toppled the statue of Joséphine de Beauharnais, burned the monument to Pierre Belain d'Esnambuc, and defaced statues of Victor Schœlcher, long upheld in the republican narrative as the abolitionist hero[30].

While much attention has been focused on monuments to colonial figures[31], less scrutiny has been given to postcolonial monuments, those commemorating emancipation and the abolition of slavery. Do these monuments, under the guise of recognition, risk reproducing colonial and patriarchal imaginaries? If so, how do they shape public memory and representation? Indeed, I argue that this global reckoning also reveals a broader need to critically examine the very commemorative narratives and processes that claim to subvert that legacy while continuing to reinscribe it. Ultimately, achieving social justice requires not only dismantling symbols of domination but also decolonizing the performance of freedom and the construction of virtue, both deeply gendered and racialized within the memorial narratives produced by state institutions and grassroots organizations alike.

Such scrutiny is all the more pressing given President Macron's January 2025 remarks that key players «forgot to say thank you» for France's role in the Sahel, revealing ongoing paternalistic colonial rhetoric of a benefactor deserving gratitude[32]. These same dynamics of colonial entitlement continue to inform the commemorative landscape. As Françoise Vergès argues in *Un féminisme décolonial*[33], the colonial state has long selectively integrated symbols of emancipation that obscure ongoing structures of oppression. In this light, the allegorical Black female figure, often used to represent the abstract ideals of liberty and redemption, functions less as a rupture with colonial aesthetics than their rearticulation. Monuments such

[28] B. Tillier, *La disgrâce des statues: Essai sur les conflits de mémoire, de la Révolution française à Black Lives Matter*. Paris, Payot, 2022.

[29] E. Macron, *Adresse aux Français, 14 juin 2020*, Élysée.fr, June 14, 2020. Web.

[30] R. Solbiac, *La destruction des statues de Victor Schoelcher en Martinique: L'exigence de réparations et d'une nouvelle politique des savoirs*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2020.

[31] Such as J. Marquet - E. Sibeud (eds), *Des statues pour la mémoire? Colonialisme et espace public en France*, in "Mémoires en jeu", 21/2024, pp. 101-177; A. Etienne - C. Forsdick - L. Moudileno (eds), *Postcolonial Realms of Memory*, England, Liverpool UP, 2020.

[32] E. Macron, *Conférence des ambassadrices et ambassadeurs 2025*, Élysée.fr, January 6, 2025. Web.

[33] F. Vergès, *Un féminisme décolonial*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2019.

as *Solitude*, *Héloïse* and *Supplique* attempt to honor resistance but do so through stylized, eroticized poses that reassert tropes of innocence, motherhood, and moral sacrifice. Grada Kilomba similarly cautions in *Plantation Memories* that the danger of commemoration lies not only in *what* is remembered, but also in the *how*[34].

4. The Tradition of Female Allegories

In France, the feminization of abstract ideals in public iconography is a longstanding tradition gaining prominence during and after the French Revolution[35]. The Republic itself is personified as Marianne, a symbol of liberty and reason[36]. Justice appears as a blindfolded woman with scales, while Liberty, captured in Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), embodies revolutionary courage. Representing the Republic as both a nurturing and desirable woman fostered male citizens' feelings of possession, protection, and patriotic desire, an eroticization of patriotism that helped bind them to the nation[37]. By the 19th century, values like Equality, Fraternity, and Peace were routinely gendered. World War I memorials further entrenched this trope with *La Mère Patrie* mourning the dead and safeguarding the nation[38]. This rich tradition situates women as caretakers, martyrs, and redeemers at the heart of France's symbolic memory and collective identity, shaping how public history and values are visually commemorated.

This deep-rooted practice provides essential context for understanding the use of the Black woman's figure in monuments commemorating the abolition of slavery, where she is often cast as the embodiment of emancipation. Yet, such symbolic representation strategies raise questions. They frequently reproduce the essentializing and sexualizing tendencies of earlier allegories, reducing complex histories and identities to fixed, stereotyped symbols centered on the female body. Stripped of agency, the Black woman becomes a metaphorical "muse" for metropolitan audiences rather than a fully realized historical actor with her own voice.

---

[34] G. Kilomba, *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism*, Münster, Unrast Verlag, 2008.

[35] J.B. Landes, *Visualizing the Nation: Gender, Representation, and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France*. Ithaca, Cornell UP, 2001.

[36] M. Agulhon, *Marianne au pouvoir. L'imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1880 à 1914*, Paris, Flammarion, 1989.

[37] Landes, *Visualizing the Nation* cit.

[38] M. Agulhon, *Les Métamorphoses de Marianne. L'imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1914 à nos jours*, Paris, Flammarion, 2001.

5. Enduring Iconographies: Allegories of Powerlessness

Let us now consider three monuments commissioned by local governments and erected between 2007 and 2011 as case studies of postcolonial commemoration. Created exclusively by male artists, this initial cluster exemplifies a gynocentric commemorative phenomenon that constructs an artistic collage mapping various stereotypical identities embedded within the Black woman. Across these memorials, the Black female body becomes the central locus through which civic consensus and national unity are symbolically negotiated in the service of societal reconciliation. Soon, through visual and symbolic cues that blend and blur, a composite commemorative archetype emerges around three dominant figures: the sanctified maternal figure, the infantilized victim, and the eroticized supplicant. Each iteration risks neutralizing the historical nuanced, multidimensional historical forms of agency of Black women, reducing them to a crucible into which the dominant national ideology pours its beliefs.

6. The Burdened Mother

Inaugurated on May 10, 2007, France's National Day of Remembrance of the Slave Trade, Slavery, and Their Abolitions, at the Place des Libertés in Bagneux, *Solitude* is both symbolically charged and ideologically constrained, anchored in her identity as a mother. The historical figure of Solitude remains elusive[39], her life in Guadeloupe fragmented by archival silences and shaped predominantly through contemporaneous male-authored sources, such as Louis Delgrès and Auguste Lacour. Her story, like that of many enslaved and resisting women, is marked by absences and gaps that obscure a full understanding of her subjectivity, agency, and lived experience. Nonetheless, the works of André and Simone Schwarz-Bart[40] and Sylvia Serbin[41] have been instrumental in reconstructing Solitude's historical and symbolic presence through what Saidiya Hartman calls «critical fabulation»[42], blending archival research with narrative invention to restore the agency of Black women omitted from dominant histories.

[39] L. Dubois, *Solitude's Statue: Confronting the Past in the French Caribbean*, in «Outre-Mers. Revue d'histoire», 350-351/2006, pp. 27-38.
[40] A. Schwarz-Bart, *La Mulâtresse Solitude*, Paris, Seuil, 1972.
[41] S. Serbin, *Reines d'Afrique et héroïnes de la diaspora noire*, Paris, Sepia, 2004.
[42] S. Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*, in «*Small Axe*», vol. 12 (2)/2008, pp. 1-14.

Born in 1772 from the rape of her African mother by a white sailor during the Middle Passage, Solitude's life was shaped by the violence of slavery from the outset. In adolescence, she adopted the name "Solitude", a choice that signals both symbolic rupture and self-repositioning. At 22, she joined the maroon resistance to fight settlers who refused to implement the 1794 abolition of slavery. Her group was suppressed in 1798, but, undeterred, Solitude assumed leadership of the survivors and allied with Louis Delgrès. Even when Napoleon reinstated slavery in 1802, and Delgrès and Joseph Ignace died in battle, she, then pregnant, remained unwavering in her commitment to the cause. Eventually captured by French troops, she was sentenced to death but kept alive until giving birth to her child destined for enslavement. Executed at thirty, she reportedly cried, *Vivre libre ou mourir*, sealing her legacy as a revolutionary martyr in Guadeloupean folklore. Known as the «the Pasionaria of the movement» or «mulâtresse Solitude», she remains a central figure of heroism, female *maroonage* and anti-colonial resistance, embodying strength, hope, defiance and resilience[43].

The *Solitude* presented in Bagneux is not the defiant, self-assured combatant who fought alongside Louis Delgrès and Joseph Ignace, but a markedly different figure. In 2006, Jean-Claude Tchicaya, then deputy in charge of youth and a founding member of *Devoirs de mémoires*, proposed to Mayor Marie-Hélène Amiable the creation of a monument honoring the dignity and resistance of Black men and women in the fight against slavery. While Tchicaya proposed replicating the assertive *Solitude* statue from Les Abymes, Guadeloupe, the municipal council unanimously opted instead to commission a new artwork by Nicolas Alquin, a prominent Belgian artist based in Bagneux.

Given the absence of historical iconography, Alquin opted for an allegorical rather than literal representation of Solitude, aiming to evoke themes of memory and loss[44]. The monument reworked an earlier sculpture inspired by Eurydice, carved from sacred iroko wood sourced from Côte d'Ivoire. To this living material, rich with ritual and historical resonance, Alquin added French iron to symbolize the violent entanglement of African bodies and identities through the triangular slave trade and colonial domination. Now split in two, the wooden column is replicated in cast iron, tripling the recessed, pregnant silhouette of Solitude.

The two wooden columns, coated in tar and scorched by fire, highlight a process of calcination that leaves the iroko wood blackened and charred. This aesthetic of

[43] R. Anduse, *Joseph Ignace, le premier rebelle*, Paris, Jasor, 1989.
[44] N. Alquin, Interview, July 6, 2011.

burning evokes not only the physical scars of slavery but also the searing wounds etched into the fabric of French national history. The resulting texture engages the visitor on multiple sensory levels: tactile, visual, and auditory. This fosters a deep and unsettling corporeal confrontation with colonial violence. The carving technique, marked by grooves and visible burin traces, further intensifies the rawness of the surface, rendering the brutality of slavery materially present. As Nicolas Alquin notes, this is «a space of burnt flesh that reminds [the viewer] of the tortures of slavery»[45], transforming the monument into a visceral archive of historical trauma.

The triangular motif is repeated throughout the tripartite monument of *Solitude*. The metaphor of the three triangular columns, each three meters high, arranged in a triangle pattern is not accidental as it seemingly marks the transatlantic trade of the same name. Arranged face to face and somewhat apart, the monument allows the visitor to step in, in this liminal space created at its core. Describing his creation, Nicolas Alquin states: «It is the void, the person who arrives is at the center of this void, they have passed through the gates of death and are facing something that belongs to eternity, it is memory, it is the [...] matrix. Solitude who is there in the negative, who no longer exists, who was taken away»[46].

Through its layered scenography, tactile materiality, and dynamic spatial design, the monument functions as a powerful storytelling site. The recurring motif of maternity prevails and serves both as a visual focal point and as a conduit for expressing the violence enacted upon Solitude. With its dialectical play of presence and absence, embodied in the interplay between positive and negative space, the monument disrupts linear temporality and dissolves the boundary between the real and the imaginary, the material and the mythical. Frozen in iron and wood, materials symbolic of the slave, Solitude is immobilized, fossilized within the very system that sought to erase her. Prisoner, she is trapped within the symbolic architecture of the triangular trade from which she seems to want to extract herself. Solitude appears almost as her own mold, existing only through her negative self. She is rendered an elusive, lingering spectral figure who resists complete representation, whether artistic or cognitive. In this ghostly *mise en abyme*, the monument intensifies the horror of slavery before the eyes of the visitor, forcing them into a direct confrontation with historical trauma and the enduring violence of colonial memory.

---

[45] A. Guyot, *Solitude, une œuvre du sculpteur Nicolas Alquin / Solitude, monuments aux esclaves résistants*, Director Axel Guyot, Paris, Avalon Films Production, 2007.

[46] *Ibidem*.

Yet, this commemorative gesture falls short. While both the *Solitude* statue in Les Abymes (1999)[47] and the one in Bagneux depict her as pregnant, their visual rhetoric diverges significantly. In Les Abymes, Solitude stands defiantly, foot forward, fists clenched on her hips, head and chin raised, and eyes fixed ahead, holding the viewer's gaze with pride and strength, a representation where maternity and militancy coexist. In contrast, under Alquin's vision, Solitude's boldness and warrior identity are removed; she is instead transformed into a more maternal and romantic figure. She is confined to an essentialized feminine and maternal role. She becomes a muse for and constructed through the artist's masculine gaze, the Guadeloupean community, and the French population, standing as a symbol of maternal sacrifice. Alquin claims «she died for us long ago, just after giving birth to her child. We are the children she so ardently desired. Let us be worthy of this freedom»[48]. Alquin further explained that he sought to capture «the matrix which is ultimately the mother of all men and women freed from slavery. Since slavery has disappeared, we all come from this womb. We all descend from Solitude. She is our mother to all of us»[49].

Solitude seems to constitute this matrix, both sculptural and anatomical. The tripartite composition evokes the morphology of the female reproductive system, alluding to the pelvic space that shelters and nurtures new life. Within this framework, the spectator, who is invited to step into this hallowed in-betweenness, emerges as the symbolic offspring, reborn from the entrails of Solitude. Here, Solitude is less cast as a historical figure or political actor, but as a maternal archetype, almost as the allegory of liberty itself. This reading essentializes her womanhood by foregrounding her reproductive capacity while obscuring the complexity of her agency, a practice common in racialized colonial contexts and imaginaries. As bell hooks argues «Black women were reduced to bodies, to sexualized and reproductive anatomy, stripped of will or subjectivity»[50]. Rather than a full subject, Solitude becomes a symbolic vessel, her identity collapsed into the metonym of the fertile womb, her resistance abstracted into maternity.

Although Alquin presents her as the mother of *freed* people, this maternal framing remains sensitive and problematic, echoing the historical logic that confined enslaved women to their reproductive roles. Constrained in their identity and autonomy, they were valued and exploited both "through" and "within" their

[47] Dubois, *Solitude's Statue* cit., p. 29.
[48] Guyot, *Solitude, une œuvre du sculpteur* cit.
[49] *Ibidem*.
[50] B. Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, Boston, South End Press, 1981, p. 15.

bodies. They were commodified as breeders, midwives, and wet nurses to produce new generations as Jennifer L. Morgan notes: «African women's childbearing was transformed into labor that could be alienated, sold, and capitalized»[51].

This gendered labor carries deep historical and emotional weight, particularly in relation to consent, bodily autonomy, and maternal rights over their own offspring. Invoking Solitude and other Black enslaved women almost solely as maternal figures inevitably recalls the biopolitical regime governing the legal and institutional mechanisms of slavery. Colonialist natalist imperatives, population control, and punitive measures such as imprisonment for abortion or infanticide, exemplify the intrusive governance over enslaved women's bodies[52]. As Arlette Gautier stresses the need to challenge traditional narratives that perpetuate colonial and patriarchal perspectives, we must apply the same critical scrutiny to postcolonial monuments to offer a more nuanced understanding of the complex roles, both overt and covert, enslaved women played in both resistance and survival.

7. The Naïve Child

Maurice Cardon's *Héloïse ou… la fille des Trois-Rivières*, inaugurated on May 10, 2008, at the Place de l'Amitié-entre-les-Peuples in Fontenay-sous-Bois, depicts a slender young girl frozen in a moment of carefree movement. She appears to soar into the air, as she seems to gambol and skip, her head and right arm raised toward the sky, one foot barely grazing the ground, and her fingertips delicately supporting a small bird.

The kinesics of her body language is marked by motifs of delicacy and fragility, traditionally associated with the female figure. This image of childlike wonder and playfulness carries a deceptive lightness, beneath which lies a deeply coded narrative of infantilization. Submission is not conveyed through overt violence but through an aesthetic of innocence that subtly masks the erasure of agency. Still shackled by half-broken chains, she appears to be playing, subjugated by the beauty of the feathered creature. The bird, which symbolizes her emancipation and freedom, becomes the focus of her curiosity and admiration. Rather than serving as a clear political emblem, it is rendered primarily as a sentimental prop within a carefully constructed tableau of innocence and fragility. This poetic aesthetic underscores a more

[51] J.L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, p. 85.

[52] Gautier, *Les Sœurs de Solitude* cit., p. 107.

ambivalent narrative: it does not suggest that she has fully domesticated the bird, and thus fully claimed her freedom, but rather evokes the precariousness of this newfound liberated state. The delicate interaction between the figure and the bird highlights the tension between captivity and liberation, reflecting a freedom that remains tentative, frail, and incomplete.

This representation exemplifies perpetual girlhood, a state in which the Black female figure is denied maturity, depth, or interiority. The sculpted form floats in a liminal space, neither child nor adult, victim nor agent, rendering her more symbolic than human. The world she inhabits, newly discovered after a seemingly hasty emancipation, remains unknown and overwhelming. The sculpture thus reinscribes a patriarchal logic that prevents any subjectivation and continues to confine the Black woman to the status of a child who is fundamentally incapable of navigating freedom and surviving in a world she discovers for the first time as a freed individual without guidance. The soft visual of candor, curiosity, and vulnerability evokes a figure not only naïve but permanently in need of care and protection.

This infantilization is not accidental but a designed disempowerment. This statue plays once again on the visual culture of erasure by dissolving the subject's interiority. While her body is fully formed in iron, her head is hollow within, represented solely by its iron contour. The sculpture's reliance on negative space in the face visually enacts the very effacement it represents: while the corporeal form is solid and present, the seat of identity and subjectivity is emptied, left as a hollow shell, never granted full material presence. This visual-ideological strategy, rooted in the absence of substance and of a reasoning being, participates in a broader epistemic violence and radicalizes Hortense Spillers' concept of the de-subjectivized body[53], where enslaved Black women were stripped of their personhood and reduced to «flesh»[54]. By withholding the head's materiality and presenting only a spectral contour, the statue becomes a "beautiful" vessel into which innocence, control and desires are projected.

This racialized and gendered violence is inseparable from the sexualizing colonial gaze imposed upon the Black female body: simultaneously hyper-visible as racialized gendered bodies and invisible as autonomous subjects. This visual mechanism of control constructs her as exotic, hypersexual, and inferior, transforming her into a legible symbol of otherness and reinforcing colonial and patriarchal hierarchies. This

[53] H.J. Spillers, *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book*, in «Diacritics», 17/1987, pp. 65-81.

[54] S. Wynter, *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation: An Argument*, in «The New Centennial Review», 3/2003, pp. 257-337.

deliberate stylization of a naked statue, wearing only her former broken shackles as accessories, offers the female figure as an object of visual consumption, sensualizing her forms through pronounced emphasis on her breasts, hips, abdomen, genitalia, buttocks, and the curvature of her back. Materially present yet cognitively absent, this Black female enacts a violent disjunction: her body is materialized for sexualized display while she is denied will, authority, and consent, subordinated to external fantasies. This disembodied representation echoes the colonial rape imaginary, in which the Black female body is constructed as perpetually accessible and available. Within this framework, Black women have been and continue to be systemically stripped not only of their freedom, but of sovereignty over their own bodies. bell hooks notes that Black women's histories and lived experiences have long been filtered through racist and sexist lenses that distort their subjectivity, while enduring stereotypes forged around them continue to shape contemporary Western social imaginaries[55].

8. The Weeping Supplicant

Unveiled on May 10, 2011, William Castaño's bronze sculpture *Supplique* stands in the Square Chevalier de Saint-George in Argenteuil. The nearly three-meter-tall artwork depicts a semi-nude female figure. A thin cloth draped loosely across her hips unravels as she arches her back, revealing her thighs, buttocks, and a glimpse of her genitalia. With her breasts bare to the viewer, knees slightly bent, head thrown backward, and arms lifted toward the sky, she strikes a dramatic pose of supplication. Her wrists still bear the marks of freshly broken chains and her open hands are turned inward toward her face to evoke a gesture of prayer or pleading.

The commemorative project originated a year earlier, during Argenteuil's 2010 annual Artists Festival, which was centered on West Africa. There, the city officials were captivated by the tall white plaster figure of an anonymous woman exhibited by the Colombian-born artist who sought to «pay tribute to the African people», focusing on «bodies in motion, dance, rituals, [and] the displaced»[56]. This sculpture was cast in bronze and installed permanently as part of the municipality's commemorations of the abolition of slavery and the ongoing struggle against discrimination and oppression. According to the City's Cultural Affairs Department,

[55] Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* cit.

[56] *Unveiling of the sculpture Supplique*, in «Mai des Artistes» Brochure, Argenteuil Art Center, May 6-12,2011.

Supplique «reflects the municipal will to invoke History and to recall the necessity of a constantly renewed reflection on the entirety of the memory of slavery»[57].

As a commemorative monument, *Supplique* functions as a compelling site of performed despair, dependency, and powerlessness. The French term *supplique* denotes a formal plea for mercy addressed to an authority; its semantic weight reinforcing the sculpture's iconography of dependency and submission to a higher power, whether divine or colonial. What is staged is not liberation, but the performance of imploring it. In fact, rather than commemorating the diverse ways Black women asserted resilience, the statue enshrines helplessness. This deliberately inscribed memory presents a sexualized, submissive Black woman who, in a final invocation, painfully pleads for deliverance. As Castaño himself stated, the figure is «a supplication to the heavens to end slavery»[58].

This de-subjectivized framing aligns with a larger visual and ideological repertoire in which Black women are repeatedly portrayed through tropes of defenselessness and victimhood. The aestheticized vulnerability of *Supplique*, its nudity, arched body, and raised arms, places it firmly within a gendered iconography of subjugation. Here, the visual script reenacts the colonial fantasy: the enslaved woman is simultaneously desired and desiring to be rescued. She remains the historiographical prey of dominant white discourse, which downplays grassroots struggles and casts emancipation as a gracious gift bestowed from above by the divine authority of the French State. These memorial semiotics displace resistance and resilience, encoding subjugation as a fixed historical role and presenting Black liberation as the moral awakening of the colonial state. Through this performative posture, the Black woman is reduced to, and entirely defined by, the act of supplication, an enduring identity cemented by the sculpture's very title, *Supplique*, which foregrounds the gesture as both the subject and the substance of her representation.

The sculpture's location intensifies its symbolic resonance. Situated in the front garden of the Departmental Conservatory of Music, Dance, and Theater, *Supplique* engages in two spatial dialogues. First, it faces the bust of Marianne, emblematic of the ideals of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, framing Castaño's figure as a plea for mercy to Marianne and, by extension, to the French Republic itself. Second, *Supplique* interacts with Joseph Bologne de Saint-George (1739-1799), a mixed-race Guadeloupean after whom the garden is named[59]. Celebrated as a revolutionary,

[57] *Ibidem.*

[58] W. Castaño, Phone Interview, February 7, 2012.

[59] G. Banat, *The Chevalier de Saint-Georges: Virtuoso of the sword and the bow*, NY, Pendragon Press, 2006.

knighted royal bodyguard under Louis XV, and influential music director for the Marquise de Montesson, his historical agency sharply contrasts with the anonymous, plaintive figure of *Supplique*, frozen in victimhood[60]. Ultimately, *Supplique* is distilled into a dual subordination of Blackness to Whiteness and of femininity to masculinity.

9. Emerging Iconographies: The Rise of Historical Figures

The shortcomings of early 2000s postcolonial monuments have left lasting impacts on both public memory and the historiography of slavery. In response, growing calls for more nuanced and empowering representations within the memorial landscape have emerged amid broader political and societal reckonings seeking to redefine the terms of national memory and historical accountability. In 2016, the *Justice pour Adama* movement, sparked by the death of Adama Traoré in police custody, reignited national debate about police brutality and racial injustice[61]. These concerns were further amplified by the international wave of anti-racist protests in 2020 and the rise of movements such as Black Lives Matter in France.

Bénédicte Savoy noted how the global resonance of the Black Lives Matter movement accelerated a «psychological change in the public», pressuring institutions to confront colonial legacies more directly and accelerating restitution efforts[62]. Three years earlier, the restitution debate had already reached a pivotal moment when President Macron publicly pledged in 2017 in Ouagadougou to return African artifacts. This commitment and the subsequent Sarr-Savoy report challenged decades of stalled restitution demands and entrenched resistance from Western museums dating back to the 1970s[63]. In parallel to this mobilization, the symbolic elevation of civil rights activist Joséphine Baker to the Panthéon in 2021, making her the first Black woman to receive this honor[64], marked a significant step in the ongoing effort to forge more inclusive narratives of belonging. This evolving political and cultural climate, driven by demands for restitution, recognition, and reparation, is now reshaping how postcolonial monuments, too, are interpreted: less as neutral

[60] W.E. Smith, *The Black Mozart: Le Chevalier De Saint-Georges*, Indiana, Author House, 2004.

[61] L. Collins, *Assa Traoré and the Fight for Black Lives in France*, in «The New Yorker», June 18, 2020, newyorker.com, Web.

[62] A. Shaw, *Black Lives Matter movement is speeding up repatriation efforts, leading French art historian says*, in «The Art Newspaper», October 21, 2020. theartnewspaper.com, Web.

[63] *Ibidem*.

[64] B. Bon-Saliba, *Noires, femmes et… artistes*, in «Tiers», 31/2021, pp. 27-34.

commemorations, and more as active sites in the struggle over memory, visibility, and historical responsibility.

Recent artistic endeavors similarly signal this paradigmatic shift, moving away from abstract allegories, often symbolic of victimhood and passive suffering, towards centering the concrete lives, strength, dignity, courage, and self-determination of Black women whose historical liberatory trajectories have been silenced: from freedom fighters and leaders of resistance to everyday survivors, all agents of liberation. As Saidiya Hartman cautions, allegorical depictions can reproduce forms of erasure by substituting real subjects with symbolic figures, thus obscuring the complexities and agency of lived experiences[65]. Foregrounding the often overlooked or «marginalized shadow heroines» not only enriches collective remembrance but also directly challenges persistent social and political inequities, by first affirming the full humanity and subjectivity of those historically erased from dominant narratives, and second by offering empowering models of identification for present and future Black and Brown communities.

Building on this reframing of memory, this second section turns to two emblematic monuments: *Modeste Testas* (2019), which unearths the personal history of a formerly enslaved Ethiopian woman, and *Solitude* (2022), which emphasizes the political activism of the legendary Guadeloupean rebel. Their emergence remains symbolically fragile and uneven, revealing the delicate complexities that still characterize contemporary commemorative efforts.

10. Modeste Testas

Inaugurated on May 10, 2019, the statue of Modeste Testas on the Quai Louis XVIII in Bordeaux stands as a powerful tangible acknowledgment of the city's broader attempt to confront, in its public space, its historical complicity in the transatlantic slave trade. Testas's gaze beyond the river toward the Atlantic horizon evokes the violence of the Middle Passage, the Caribbean colonies on the other shore, and the estimated 150,000 Africans, who were transported by Bordeaux's merchants to be exploited on colonial plantations. This sculpture, therefore, situates Testas's story in the very geography that profited directly from her subjugation, forcing a confrontation with the city's historical complicity and the enduring legacies of racialized displacement.

[65] S. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York - Oxford, Oxford UP, 1997.

Born in Ethiopia around 1765 as Al Pouessi, she was captured with her mother during an inter-tribal conflict and sold into slavery on the West African coast between 1778 and 1781 to two Bordeaux merchants, Pierre and François Testas[66]. Baptized Marthe Adélaïde Modeste Testas, she was taken as a teenager to the brothers' plantation in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti). There, at the age of sixteen, she endured the dual exploitation of enslavement and sexual coercion, living with François Testas as his "concubine" and bearing him two children. While François oversaw the plantation, Pierre managed the family's commercial operations in Bordeaux, ensuring the profitable sale of their sugar and cotton. Modeste was later brought to the United States, passing through Baltimore, New York City, and Philadelphia, where François Testas died in 1795. Following his death, and in accordance with his will, she was emancipated and was married to Joseph Lespérance, another formerly enslaved individual François Testas had owned. The couple eventually settled in Haiti with their children until she died at the age of 105[67].

Created by Haitian sculptor Woodly Caymitte, known as Filipo, the 5'7" life-sized bronze sculpture of Modeste Testas was officially inaugurated by mayor Nicolas Florian, accompanied by municipal and regional representatives, including the regional deputy, and anthropologist Carole Lemee. The presence of Lorraine Manuel Steed, a Haitian descendant of Modeste Testas, at the ceremony underscored the transnational dimension of the monument's significance, bridging local memory with diasporic legacies and highlighting the enduring global reverberations of France's colonial past. Marik Fetouh, deputy mayor in charge of Equality and Citizenship, also remarked at the statue's unveiling: «It was important that this piece bear witness to the lived experience of an enslaved woman with an exceptional life story, also connected to Bordeaux»[68].

By foregrounding Modeste Testas's name, face, and personal story, the monument marks a significant departure from conventional postcolonial memorials. It shifts the narrative from anonymous victimhood to a personalized account, humanizing a history which too often reduced millions of enslaved Africans to faceless numbers. This life-sized figurative sculpture invites an ethical encounter with the past, one centered on the lived experience of a woman who endured enslavement. In doing so, it fosters a more intimate, empathic, and accountable

[66] J. Lalouette, *Les Statues de la discorde*, Paris, Passés/Composés, 2021, p. 154.
[67] *Ivi*, p. 156.
[68] *Avec Modeste Testas, Bordeaux regarde son passé négrier en face*, in «Rue 89 Bordeaux», May 10, 2019, rue89brodeaux.com, Web.

model of remembrance. Rather than relying on generic or idealized representations, the monument asserts the visibility of a specific individual, offering a deeply humanized entry point into the complexities of survival and emancipation. By naming Modeste Testas, a woman directly linked to both Bordeaux and Saint-Domingue through her enslavers, the statue challenges collective forgetting and confronts Bordeaux, and by extension France.

Yet, this gesture is not without challenges. While the erection of a monument to Modeste Testas may be a laudable gesture, a rare instance of honoring an exceptional historical woman formerly enslaved, it simultaneously exposes the tensions, contradictions and limitations that often haunt postcolonial commemorative practices. A closer reading of the narrative indeed complicates this celebratory framing.

Testas's life trajectory is encapsulated in a commemorative bronze plaque set at her feet. Although it acknowledges aspects of the exploitation Modeste Testas endured, it does so within a brief and softened summary that subtly leans toward redemption and benevolence. The use of the term "concubine", in particular, is far from a neutral descriptor. This politically and culturally charged language obscures the absence of consent inherent in slavery by shifting the narrative from sexual violence and ownership to consensual intimacy and companionship. Rather than centering the trauma of the enslaved, such rhetorical choices work to humanize and partially exonerate the enslaver, implying that Modeste Testas had a privileged status. This discursive maneuver not only distorts the realities of racial and sexual domination but also reflects the ongoing tensions in how postcolonial societies construct and sanitize their commemorative narratives.

This redemptive framing persists with the account of Modeste Testas's emancipation and the land bestowed by her enslaver in his will, casting François Testas as seemingly generous while reinscribing the deep-rooted power dynamics that abolition monuments claim to dismantle. In reality, the gesture masks the extent of his control. Even in death, he dictated her emancipation, inheritance, and marriage to a man of his choosing, keeping her freedom tightly circumscribed and contingent on his posthumous authority.

The plaque also highlights Modeste Testas's grandson, François Denys Légitime (1841-1935), who rose to high military and political positions (adjutant general and Secretary of State of the Interior and of Agriculture) before becoming Haiti's sixteenth president (1888-1889)[69]. This inclusion offers a convenient narrative of

[69] Lalouette, *Les Statues de la discorde* cit.

upward mobility and legacy, subtly positioning Bordeaux as the origin of a transatlantic "success story", while eliding the coercion and exploitation that shaped the family's history.

In fact, the commemorative plaque frames responsibility primarily through the actions of individual actors, namely the brothers Pierre and François Testas. Although identifying enslavers is an important step toward restoring historical truth, the omission of Bordeaux's and France's institutional complicity, which established and profited from the system, reduces slavery to a matter of private morality rather than collective accountability. By proclaiming that «Bordeaux honors Modeste Testas» and the «150,000 slaves who have been deported [...] from the port of Bordeaux»[70], without confronting the city's own role in state-sanctioned systems of racial and economic domination, the plaque falls short of the structural recognition required for memory to become reparative rather than merely symbolic.

The context of the statue's genesis further reveals how these symbolic gestures were institutionally directed. In 2016, amid mounting public pressure from associations such as the Bordeaux-based international organization, *Mémoires & Partages* (dedicated to raising awareness about colonization, slavery, racism, and their continuing impact on French society), then-mayor Alain Juppé established a municipal commission on the memory of slavery, chaired by Marik Fetouh[71]. The commission, composed of scholars and a museum director, relied on archival research, over a thousand public responses to a citywide questionnaire, and interviews with Steed, Modeste Testas's descendant, whose contribution added genealogical and emotional significance.[72] Among the ten proposals in the report, Proposal Seven recommended the erection of a statue to a woman, Modeste Testas. This suggestion aligned with the city's concurrent diplomatic plan, Proposal Three, to establish a symbolic partnership with Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Following these institutional proposals, Haitian artist Filipo was invited to create the statue. While the artist exercised agency in designing the sculpture, the broader symbolic framing and objectives of the project had already been shaped by municipal priorities and diplomatic aspirations.

[70] Commemorative plaque installed with the sculpture *Modeste Testas* in Bordeaux, 2019.

[71] *Propositions et Rapport de la 'Commission de réflexion sur la traite négrière et l'esclavage' (Bordeaux)*, in «Société française d'histoire des outre-mers», May 8, 2018, sfhom.com, Web.

[72] *Ibidem*.

Karfa Diallo, president of *Mémoires & Partages*, has been vocal regarding this commemorative «acte manqué»[73]. Initially serving on the commission, he eventually withdrew due to ideological disagreements, questioning the symbolic selection of Modeste Testas: «How can a woman who was "freed" in 1795 in Philadelphia, four years after the Haitian Revolution that would signal the end of the slave system, represent the memory of colonial slavery?» [74] He notably denounced the commission's report for stating that «the family accounts say that [François Testas] treated her well»[75], condemning it as a paternalistic gesture that recast a history of domination and commodification in terms of personal kindness. For Diallo, such a narrative dangerously minimizes the inherent structural cruelty of slavery and enables the city to sidestep a deeper reckoning with its historical complicity. By embedding the monument within a moralizing narrative that highlights a supposedly "humane" enslaver, the representation risks softening the brutal realities of slavery and perpetuating the enduring myth of the kind master, one that depicts Black subjects as grateful recipients of white mercy rather than as autonomous agents of their own histories. He has since called for the creation of a more substantial memorial to the abolition of slavery, similar to the one established in Nantes in 2012[76].

Ultimately, the memorialization of Modeste Testas reveals the complex and often ambivalent nature of contemporary commemorative practices. First, it raises questions about the choice of historical figures memorialized. For some critics, commemorating an emancipated Modeste Testas casts her as a passive beneficiary of benevolence, reducing her story to a binary take on agency: either she was freed by her enslaver's goodwill or she independently achieved self-liberation through individual resilience. Yet, this dichotomic framing risks obscuring the persistent power structures underlying her legacy, which remained entangled in subjugation and dependency. The absence of documented resistance should not be mistaken for the absence of agency. Rather, it reflects how the lives of enslaved women were filtered through colonial records that erased or downplayed their capacity for resilience, negotiation, and survival within systems of domination. Second, the monument reflects an attempt to balance and reconcile historical acknowledgment with the desire to preserve national and municipal reputations. This tension becomes

[73] K.S. Diallo, *Pourquoi 'une affranchie' ne peut représenter la mémoire de l'esclavage?*, blogs.mediapart.fr, August 13, 2019, Web.

[74] *Ibidem*.

[75] *Propositions et Rapport de la 'Commission de réflexion sur la traite négrière et l'esclavage' (Bordeaux)* cit.

[76] Diallo, *Pourquoi 'une affranchie' ne peut représenter la mémoire de l'esclavage?* cit.

particularly salient in the accompanying plaque's euphemistic language such as the uncritical use of the word "concubine" which misses the realities of sexual coercion under slavery.

While the monument restores visibility to a long-erased historical figure, it simultaneously demands greater nuance and contextualization. Without such complexity, the narrative leans toward prioritizing, whether intentionally or not, a paternalistic white saviorism and national self-congratulatory narratives over critical engagement, allowing Bordeaux and, by extension France, to appear reflective and reconciliatory while ultimately saving face.

Further tensions became starkly visible on September 13, 2021, when the statue was defaced with white plaster, coating the entire upper half of Modeste Testas's body with streaks running down to her feet[77]. This act of vandalism immediately raised the alarm. Although the perpetrator, an art student, claimed their intent was merely an "artistic act" to cast a mold from the statue and denied any racist intent, the visual and historical resonance of this symbolic "whitewashing" was unmistakable. Local associations such as *Mémoires & Partages*, along with municipal officials, swiftly condemned the striking and unsettling incident[78]. While the monument was promptly restored, *Mémoires & Partages* chose to maintain its legal complaint, underscoring the seriousness of the act and its broader implications. Indeed, the episode revealed the persistent vulnerability of commemorative initiatives that confront France's colonial and slaveholding legacies. It also exposed the volatile sensitivity and contentious nature of public memory, where symbolic violence and denial continue to threaten acts of historical recognition.

11. Solitude

Nine months pregnant, a bronze Solitude is running across a public square, her dress billowing and brushing the fresh green grass, as she brandishes, defiant and resolute, the tightly held Proclamation of Monnerau to rally the world against Napoleon's reinstatement of slavery in the colonies.

This anachronistic and surreal scene, set in the heart of Paris, powerfully ruptures historical time, juxtaposing past and present to reimagine Solitude's role beyond geographical and temporal boundaries. An anti-slavery insurgent in Guadeloupe,

[77] *Dégradation 'raciste' d'une statue à Bordeaux : c'était en fait un moulage par un étudiant en art*, in «Sud-Ouest», September 14, 2021, Sudouest.fr, Web.

[78] *Ibidem*.

Solitude's symbolic journey to the metropole represents a transgressive crossing into the very seat of power where decisions regarding her fate and that of her people were made. In this imagined moment, braving time and space, she confronts the brutal reversal of the 1794 abolition of slavery by the French state, alerting Parisian passersby to an historical decision and forcing a reckoning with the enduring legacies of colonial violence and domination.

In this depiction, Solitude is clearly an active political agent. She is shown in forward motion, holding high the manifesto issued on May 10, 1802, just ten days before the reinstatement of slavery. As Commandant of Basse-Terre, Delgrès had published the Proclamation entitled «to the entire world, the final cry of innocence and despair», affirming that «Resistance to oppression is a natural right»[79]. With these words, the declaration connects Solitude to a broader revolutionary discourse and situates her as a living conduit of collective insurrection. This visual act evokes directly a transhistorical transmission of anti-colonial struggle across generations. The juxtaposition of her visibly pregnant body and militant gesture encapsulates the convergence of generative and revolutionary forces, suggesting that freedom is forged as much through resilience and continuity as through armed resistance. This representation disrupts reductive portrayals of Black women as solely maternal or militant, adopting instead a feminist and postcolonial visual grammar that asserts complexity, agency, and defiance. Her posture evokes self-determination, strength, and the unbreakable will of the oppressed. The monument thus does more than commemorate, it performs a political gesture, reviving a language of refusal that confronts France's historical amnesia.

The creation of the 2022 statue of Solitude in Paris was the culmination of a deliberate commemorative initiative led by the City of Paris to honor the legacy of this Guadeloupean militant and to reinscribe colonial and postcolonial histories into the urban fabric of the metropole. The process began on September 26, 2020, with the naming of the *Jardin Solitude Fanm' Doubout'*, creole for "Standing Woman" in the 17th arrondissement, Place Général-Catroux, a symbolic recognition of Caribbean women's resistance. During the dedication ceremony, Mayor Anne Hidalgo publicly committed to the installation of a monument within the newly named space, explicitly citing the urgent need to address the absence of historical Black women in France's monumental iconography and to enrich collective memory[80] with figures

[79] Fondation pour la Mémoire de l'esclavage, *Louis Delgrès, Le Cri de l'Innocence et du Désespoir*, memoire-esclavage.org, Web.

[80] M. Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, (1950), Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1997.

emblematic of anti-slavery struggle[81]. This commemorative gesture was further anchored by the presence and advocacy of Guadeloupean Jacques Martial, the newly appointed deputy in charge of Overseas Territories, and former director of the Mémorial ACTe in Pointe-à-Pitre, the first cultural institution of its kind in the French Caribbean dedicated to the history, memory, and legacy of slavery. Martial notably emphasized Solitude's agency, declaring: «This woman engaged politically, took up arms to defend the values of the Republic, and paid for it with her life»[82].

To bring this vision to life, the City of Paris launched a public call for artistic proposals that same month, inviting submissions that could capture both the historical weight and contemporary resonance of Solitude's legacy. French artist Didier Audrat, whose artistic trajectory includes two decades spent working in Guadeloupe, was ultimately selected. Amid the archival silence surrounding visual or detailed historical descriptions of Solitude, Audrat's rendering plays on «movement»[83]. I would argue that, depicted mid-run, Solitude is both *in* movement and *a* movement; a dynamic strategy that bridges material form and historical meaning; a visual echo of the fluid nature of anti-colonial resistance and the multi-layered forms of agency enacted by the Black population in the face of colonial violence; a movement that sets in motion the complexities of Solitude's political activism, personal sacrifice, and emotional intensity, reflecting Paul Ricoeur's notion that memory is not a mere static recollection of the past but, rather, an interpretive act shaped by the present[84].

Unveiled strategically on May 10, 2022, the 2.5-meter statue was surrounded by notable figures including former Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault, writer Simone Schwarz-Bart[85], and Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo who underscored the symbolic and political weight of the statue, emphasizing its dual function as both an act of remembrance and a message to future generations about the essential contributions of Black women to the nation's history. As she inaugurated the first statue of a Black woman in Paris, Hidalgo, the first woman to serve as mayor of the city, positioned herself as both a champion of inclusive memory and a political figure shaping her own legacy, stating, «All of this could have happened faster, in recognizing the history of France. I will be the mayor who brought collective heritage to the

[81] Fondation pour la Mémoire de l'esclavage, *Statue Solitude*, memoire-esclavage.org, Web.

[82] *Victimes de l'esclavage: qui était Solitude, la 'mulâtresse'?*, in «Le Monde», May 10, 2022, lemonde.fr, Web.

[83] Audrat, *Solitude*.

[84] P. Ricoeur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paris, Seuil, 2000.

[85] A.-S. Schwarz-Bart, *Hommage à la femme noire*, Paris, Éditions Consulaires, 1989.

forefront»[86]. Ayrault, president of the *Fondation pour la Mémoire de l'Esclavage*, further emphasized Solitude's singular significance: «There are already statues of Black women in Paris, but they are allegorical statues, representations of Africa, of an exoticized continent»[87].

Two centuries after her death, Solitude's monument reimagines her final chapter, depicting her as the defiant, fierce rallying force she was, unyielding in the face of oppression. Emerging into the public eye from the shadows of historical anonymity, she reclaims visibility, asserting agency over victimhood and a rightful place within collective consciousness. As the first statue of a Black woman in Paris[88], *Solitude* challenges the imperial cityscape long shaped by selective memory, silences, and the systemic erasure of Black resistance in all its forms.

Its placement in the affluent 17th arrondissement, on Place Général Catroux (named after a «compagnon de la Liberation» intertwined with France's colonial and decolonial trajectories in Morocco, Algeria, Indochina, Syria, and Lebanon[89]) generates a particularly tense intersection between the memory of anti-slavery struggle and the persistent vestiges of French imperialism in public space. This underscores how memorials in metropolitan France often occupy complex, contested spatial narratives where resistance and colonial history coexist uneasily. Situated directly across from *Fers*, the monument to General Thomas-Alexandre Dumas, Solitude enters a spatial dialogue with this other Black figure long effaced from national memory, whose memorialization has sparked both symbolic and financial controversy (for some locals, *Fers* is downplayed or depoliticized to preserve the real estate appeal of the surrounding upscale buildings)[90]. Steeped in layered histories, they collectively inscribe their lives and legacies, marking a long-overdue act of recognition and echoing Françoise Vergès' call for decolonial practices of remembrance, ones that resist the abstraction and neutralization of Black bodies within the cityscape[91].

Solitude's presence in continental France operates as a powerful counter-narrative that invites deeper interrogation of Joan Scott's critique of the «myth of

[86] I. Apetovi, *10 mai: la statue de l'héroïne guadeloupéenne Solitude inaugurée à Paris*, in «France info Outre-mer», May 11, 2022, la1ere.franceinfo.fr, Web.

[87] *À Paris, la première statue représentant une femme noire a été inaugurée*, in «Konbini», May 11, 2022, Konbini.com, Web.

[88] *Solitude, une statue emblématique de la lutte contre l'esclavage*, in «Mairie de Paris», paris.fr, Web.

[89] *Gen. Georges Catroux, 92, Dies*, in «The New York Times», December 21, 1969, nytimes.com, Web.

[90] J. Rieucau, *La place Catroux. Le pari mémoriel de la reconnaissance de l'esclavage dans un quartier aisé de Paris*", in «Mappemonde», 2022, Web.

[91] Vergès, *Un féminisme décolonial* cit.

universalism»[92] and indicts the racialized foundations of the Republic. The statue's accompanying plaque presents Solitude as a mythic figure of anti-colonial resistance who «chose to take up arms alongside Louis Delgrès against General Richepance's expedition»[93], while also exposing, through an excerpt from the 1802 proclamation, the moral contradiction and failure of the Enlightenment regarding racial justice, and denouncing powerful men «who do not want Black men, or those drawing their origin from this color, other than in the irons of slavery»[94]. These textual cues prompt critical reflection, compelling the public to interrogate the selective humanism embedded in republican ideals and to confront the «necropolitics»[95] of the former empire, which determines whose lives are grievable, and whose are rendered disposable. Indeed, history is produced not only by what is remembered but by what is systematically silenced[96]. This potential was further amplified by the extensive media coverage surrounding both the garden's inauguration in 2020 and the statue's unveiling in 2022, which helped inscribe Solitude's rebellious legacy into broader public memory. In this sense, *Solitude* complicates the sanitized memory of abolition and challenges the Republic's self-image, reflecting Frantz Fanon's insistence that decolonization is not merely a transfer of power, but a complete reconfiguration of the colonial order of being[97].

Far from a mere tribute, this sculpture is a rupture, an act of justice, an enduring cry of *vivre libre ou mourir*, a rallying force, urging Black and Brown communities and their allies to confront and dismantle the systemic racial hierarchies that sustain postcolonial amnesia and racial domination in France's social and political structures to this day. In elevating Solitude, Paris begins to shift focus from white male savior figures like Victor Schoelcher to the forgotten heroes who resisted slavery with their bodies, voices, and lives. As a site where postcolonial critique, feminist memorialization, and republican ideals converge, the monument acknowledges the intersectionality[98] of race, gender, and resistance, reframing Solitude not as a passive martyr but as a political subject and a catalyst for reimagining civic force.

---

[92] J.W. Scott, *Parité! Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005.

[93] Commemorative plaque of the sculpture *Solitude* by Didier Audrat.

[94] *Ibidem*.

[95] A. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, translated by A. M. Berrett, California, University of California Press, 2001.

[96] M.-R. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1995.

[97] F. Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, préface de J.-P. Sartre, Paris, Maspero, 1961.

[98] K. Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, in «University of Chicago Legal Forum», 1/1989, pp. 139–167.

Ultimately, *Solitude* articulates the multiple dimensions of her legacy within a «plural memory»[99], encompassing her roles as a political agent, insurgent, revolutionary militant, and mother whose presence resists both erasure and reductive interpretation.

12. Conclusion

In France, as in many postcolonial societies, the memory of abolition is both a deeply political and culturally charged terrain. The legacy of slavery, entangled with colonial violence and enduring racial hierarchies, continues to shape how communities remember and commemorate the past. As Pierre Nora argues, *lieux de mémoire* are never neutral[100]; They are constructed by selective narratives that reflect contemporary social and political agendas. Acting as tangible markers of history, these sites shape public consciousness by highlighting certain aspects of the past while obscuring others. In postcolonial contexts where the wounds of slavery remain palpable, such memorials function as critical instruments in the ongoing negotiation of identity, justice, and recognition.

In examining the racial and gendered grammar of memory surrounding the abolition of slavery and its recurring tropes in metropolitan France, this article reveals how the visual rhetoric of postcolonial monuments often intertwines and reinscribes colonial and patriarchal frameworks onto the Black female body. While intended to commemorate and honor, these monuments frequently replicate the very hierarchical power structures of domination they seek to overcome. What emerges then is a commemorative debacle, a sculpting of subjugation, that casts Black women to static, symbolic roles of submission, supplication, infantilization, and sexualization, thus eclipsing narratives of resistance, everyday quiet resilience, intersectionality, and political subjectivity. Françoise Vergès warns against the «neoliberal solution» of placing statues «here and there» thus risking a superficial tokenism that ultimately fails the broader project of historical justice and decolonial memory[101].

---

[99] Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* cit.

[100] P. Nora, *Entre histoire et mémoire*, in *Les lieux de mémoire*, *1. La République*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997, pp. XV–XLII.

[101] F. Vergès, *Entretien. Le privilège blanc existe, même pour les plus pauvres. Il faut le déconstruire,* in «Regards», June 15, 2020, regardsyoutube.com, Web.

Alquin's *Solitude* is confined to the role of womb, symbolizing the maternal figure to the nation and embodying the pain and resilience of countless enslaved women whose bodies were commodified, exploited, and controlled. Similarly, Cardon's *Héloïse* embodies the myth of Black naïveté through which Black women are disempowered through narratives of innocence and helplessness, casting them as perpetually incapable of autonomy and in constant need of paternalistic guidance. Finally, Castaño's *Supplique* perpetuates the myth of the pleading enslaved figure awaiting liberation as a benevolent gift bestowed by a white savior.

These facets lead to a composite and multidimensional commemorative profile of the Black woman, an emerging archetype shaped within a persistent gendered ideological continuum produced by both white Western and Black patriarchal societies across the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods[102]. In this light, the statues discussed in the first section seem to strip Black women of any agency, whether overt or covert. They appear to erase every trace of autonomy or resistance, reducing the figures to inert symbols. The accompanying plaques seem only to reinforce this void, offering no acknowledgment of Black women's capacity for self-determination or of the multifaceted expressions of agency they embodied. Without such pedagogical guidance, the public is unlikely to grasp the diverse ways enslaved women quietly resisted in their everyday lives, leaving the audience with a flat, reductive image emptied of historical depth.

Marking a shift away from allegorical representations that generalized or mythologized colonial subjects, recent monuments to the abolition of slavery, such as *Modeste Testas* and *Solitude* (2022), foreground specific historical Black women through powerful figurative sculpture, reclaiming their individual histories and presence. While the *Modeste Testas* statue pushes against erasure by naming and honoring with gravitas Al Pouessi, the tension, for some critics, lies in the choice of a figure whose emancipation was granted by her enslaver after his death. This complicates its symbolic force, risking a paternalistic narrative that conceals the struggles at the heart of Black resistance. Solitude, the first Black woman commemorated with a statue in Paris, stands as a rare embodiment of political agency and resistance in public memory. Her figure captures a moment of active defiance, rallying others to spread the news of Delgrès's call for rebellion, powerfully asserting Black female leadership amid Napoleonic re-enslavement.

In the wake of the 2020 global reckoning with colonial monuments, these postcolonial sculptures stand as cautionary symbols of how memory can, consciously

[102] Cf. Gilman, *Black Bodies, White Bodies* cit.

or subconsciously, perpetuate historical trauma and amnesia. As Françoise Vergès reminds us, «statues are not history; they are political choices»[103]. Even postcolonial monuments remain active sites of contestation over meaning and identity, making it imperative to center marginalized histories with ethical rigor to confront the violent entanglements of race, gender, and colonial history. This requires sustained attention to justice and the complexities of memory politics, rejecting self-congratulatory commemorative initiatives depicting France as morally redeemed.

The stakes are high, as equitable representation in memory work not only shapes collective understandings of the past but also correlates with ongoing struggles for social justice. True progress demands accountability, more inclusive, intersectional memorial practices that embrace the complexity of enslaved Black women's experiences and their multifaceted realities and multilayered agencies while actively dismantling the persistent colonial and paternalistic frameworks. Only then can monuments and commemorations become powerful tools for recognition, reparative justice, and transformative healing in postcolonial societies.

[103] Vergès, *Entretien. Le privilège blanc existe, même pour les plus pauvres* cit.