

France Faces Demons of its Own Slave History with Monument

Written by Elise Vincent

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Those going through the *Legion d'Honneur* Square in the northern Seine-Saint-Denis suburb of Paris, will notice the presence of a globe-shaped monument in the middle of a flower bed, as Elise Vincent reports in this article for *Le Monde*

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As they come closer, they will see that names, surnames and numbers have been etched onto colorful medallions. A plaque at the foot of the monument will tell them that these are the names of [former slaves](#) , along with their identification number. There are precisely 213 of them. A



nd if they read to the end, they will learn that these names are also the names of French West Indians, who added their ancestors – found through genealogy – to the list.

This new monument was inaugurated on May 23 by the Minister of Overseas France, Victorin Lurel. The same day, a similar sculpture was unveiled in Sarcelles, in another northern suburb of Paris – Val d'Oise. For the past 15 years, both Sarcelles and Saint-Denis, two cities where the French West Indian diaspora is most important, have been marking the “victims of slavery” on this very day.

These are not the first monuments France has erected to commemorate slavery. Former

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Presidents J [Jacques Chirac](#) and Nicolas Sarkozy even inaugurated one together in 2007, in Paris's famous Luxembourg Garden. But even though every little French village has a monument engraved with the names of those who died during World War I and World War II, there are few such monuments for former slaves.

The monuments in Saint-Denis and Sarcelles would certainly not have come to life, without the desire of Antilleans (French West Indians), who wanted to pay homage, in their own name, to the Africans that France reduced to slavery for more than two centuries. The memorials are also the fruit of a little Parisian organization – CM 98 – which struggles to keep alive the memory of slavery's victims -- and make France face this tragic past.

Overcoming the stigma

In most of the French West Indies, even today, lighter skins are considered more attractive than darker skins. Only an experienced eye can tell the difference between the different nuances of black by which many Antilleans define themselves: *metis* ("mixed-race"), *quarteron* ("one-quarter black"), *chabin* ("having two black parents but being light-skinned")...

This sort of [Stockholm syndrome](#) influences family trees. While in France many look for ancestors within the French aristocracy, many in the French overseas territories look for "white" colonists in their family trees, rather than "black" slaves.

The goal of CM 98 is to help all Antilleans – and their descendants – who want to research their [family tree](#)

. "After years of thinking about it, we came to the conclusion that the problems in our islands were often linked to skin colors," explains CM 98 vice-president Emmanuel Gordien. "We want them to overcome the stigma of slavery, the idea that slaves were

[dirty and depraved](#)

."

On the table of her living room in Aulnay-sous-Bois, in the suburb of Seine-Saint-Denis, Chantal Charles-Fred unfolds her family tree. This 45-year-old woman from the French West Indies

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Island of Martinique has always been curious of her origins. In her home, everything recalls her native island – her trinkets, her two massive aquariums, a tapestry on the wall showing a beautiful beach.

For a long time she researched her family tree by herself. But when she discovered, thanks to CM 98, the person she points to with her finger, at the top of the maternal side of the tree, Charles-Fred says she was shocked to see the caption *born in Africa*. His name was Maximin Criart – identification number 128. Maximin was 30 when he was

[emancipated](#)

and given a surname.

Chantal doesn't have any resentment. Like all those who worked with CM 98 to have their ancestors' names etched into the monuments, she does not intend on filing for financial reparations from the French government.

"For me, it is just a way to affirm myself," she says, "knowing your origins makes you stronger."

CM 98's secret weapon is a unique database of 120,000 names that they were able to build after searching the archives of French [overseas territories](#) for seven years. They researched documents that are not known to the general public, but that historians know well: the registers where the surnames of emancipated slaves were written after the abolition of slavery in 1848.

These notebooks, which were inscribed by quill, are called the registries of the "newly freed" in Guadeloupe, and the registries of the "individualities" in Martinique. Before these registers were created, the slaves only had a first name and an identification number. When they were mentioned in official deeds, it was in the same way that cattle or hectares of land were mentioned.

The distribution of surnames were made by officials who were more or less inspired. In some villages they just inverted the syllables of the first names: Marie became "Rima." Others had [m](#)

ythology

on their mind and went with

Dionysos
("Dionysus") or

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Andromaque

("Andromache"). The unluckiest slaves were afflicted with "shameful names" such as

Bracoupe

("Amputated-Arm"),

Grospoil

("Big Hair"),

Gros Desir

("Big Lust")...

For the sculptures to become a symbol, CM 98 activists made sure there would not only list the names of those who researched their family trees. For many Sundays in a row, they held office at the Saint-Denis and Sarcelles town halls so that anybody with family papers could come and discover the identity of their ancestors.

Tearful discoveries

To be sure that people came, they searched the directories of the two cities. They identified [Antillean-sounding](#) family names and wrote to them on the stationary of the Sarcelles and Saint-Denis town halls.

"We have decided to inaugurate a monument to honor the women and men who were victims of slavery (...). If you want the name of your ancestor – your name or your father or mother's – to be added to the monument, CM 98 is waiting for you," said the letter.

Marie-Veronique Jeremy, 63, a retired nurse answered the call. "Tell me everything," said the volunteer who welcomed her, shaking with emotion and holding her family papers carefully wrapped in plastic.

Marie-Veronique gave her father's name. The computer found the identity of a certain Noel Jeremy, emancipated in 1849, at 47, in [Guadeloupe](#) . She started crying: "I am black, but I didn't think..."

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Ariane Virginius-Porton, a CM 98 volunteer, explains: "Even today, in France, we don't tell our children the truth. Every three years they spend their holidays in the islands. They think they will be living the good life, and when they find out their grandparents' house is a hut, they are shocked."

Laura Felip, 33, whose family is from Guadeloupe, had the name of her ancestors engraved on the document. "I was not brought up in the culture of shame," she says.

The window is open. The sun delicately sets. Felip explains that she is often asked for her "residence permit" when she has administrative papers to fill out, even though being from overseas territories makes her fully French. Quietly, she says that she would like those monuments to help people understand that "you can be black and French."

Read the article in the [original language](#) .

For the original report go to <http://www.worldcrunch.com/culture-society/france-facing-demons-of-its-own-slavery-history/antilles-french-west-indies-guadeloupe-martinique-slavery/c3s12146/>