

FRANÇOISE VERGÈS



MONSTERS AND REVOLUTIONARIES
COLONIAL FAMILY ROMANCE AND MÉTISSAGE



Monsters
and Revolutionaries



Françoise Vergès

**MONSTERS AND
REVOLUTIONARIES**

Colonial Family Romance

and *Métissage*

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For my parents, Laurence and Paul Vergès

and for Laurent Vergès (1955–1988)



Contents



Illustrations ix

Preface: Bitter Sugar's Island xi

Acknowledgments xix

1

The Family Romance of French Colonialism
and *Métissage* 1

2

Contested Family Romances: Slaves, Workers, Children 22

3

Blood Politics and Political Assimilation 72

4

"Oté Debré, rouver la port lenfer, Diab kominis i sa rentré":
Cold War Demonology in the Postcolony 123

5

Single Mothers, Missing Fathers, and French Psychiatrists 185

Epilogue: A Small Island 246

Notes 251

Bibliography 353

Index 389

Illustrations



1. *The Chinese Cock and the Gallic Cock: A Fable.*
Political Cartoon, 1963. 161
2. “Goûte ça, c’est un fortifiant de mon invention!”
(Taste this, it is a tonic that I have invented!)
Political Cartoon, 1967. 164
- 3 & 4. Political Cartoons, 1964. 168
5. Political Cartoon, 1964. 169

Preface

Bitter Sugar's Island



"But we can't go in," Chacko explained, "because we've been locked out. And when we look in through the windows, all we see are shadows. And when we try and listen, all we hear is a whispering. And we cannot understand the whispering, because our minds have been invaded by a war. A war that we have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves.

"We're Prisoners of War," Chacko said. "Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore. Our sorrows will never be sad enough. Our joys never happy enough. Our dreams never big enough. Our lives never important enough. To matter."

Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*

This book is about the political history of my country, Réunion Island, and about emancipatory discourses developed there, about their power to shape reality, the possibilities they offered to, and the limits they imposed on, the population of a small island in the Indian Ocean. As the island's political history has been, since the 1930s, intimately tied to the history of my family, this book is also about members of my family. I do not underestimate the difficulty

of retrieving the history of present times, when memory and history are deeply entangled. I play with what a French historian has called “human flesh,” and I recognize that the stakes are still high. There is always the temptation to offer an anachronistic or embellished representation of the events. On which testimonies, which documents, which archives, do I rest my argument? How do I choose among archival sources? What do the exclusions that I perform say about the text’s archaeological selection? I could not entirely avoid being ideologically involved, because traces of colonialism remain and my country is still dependent on France. My sympathies are clear. I side with the anticolonialists in Réunion, with those who have tried for decades to transform a political and economic situation of dependence. There is a high risk of producing a text that ends up being a plea, an apology, or an accusation rather than an explanation. It is a risk that I have consciously taken.

In the last decade, re-visions of the colonial and imperial project have shown that the study of a micropolitical colonial phenomenon can shed light on the complex mechanisms of the colonial relation. On the one hand, such a study insists on the singularity of each colonial experience; on the other, it allows analogies, comparisons, contrasts with other colonial experiences. We who come from our planet’s smallest countries, where people had “no Industrial Revolution, no revolution of any kind, no Age of Anything, no world wars, no decades of turbulence balanced by decades of calm,”¹ may be said to “suffer from the traumata of insignificance.”² As the Mauritian thinker Françoise Lionnet put it, insular “minorities” can “never be tempted by the illusions of leadership, never be deluded into thinking that we can represent anyone but ourselves.”³ Our joys will never be happy enough. Our dreams never big enough. Our lives never important enough. *To matter.*

Studies of French colonialism have paid little attention to the small islands of the French first colonial empire. They do not seem to offer a site of historical and political investigations that would add to postcolonial theory.⁴ Yet within postcolonial investigations, the “power of historical locality becomes particularly persuasive,” Homi Bhabha has written, “as the problem of cultural identity is staged in the discourse of geographical complexity—migration, diaspora, postcoloniality.”⁵ The history of Réunion (a colony) is part of the history of France (the empire). Geographically distanced but politically integrated, Réunion Island offers a specific site of re-

search: it is a constituted minority within the nation France but is situated at the periphery; a mercenary minority to its neighbors (independent states that have to confront the West and global capitalism), for it is France's watchdog; a European territory (as a French department, Réunion belongs to the European Economic Community) in an African-Asian environment. What does the political history of emancipation in Réunion bring to postcolonial studies?

My country, Réunion Island, is a small island, formerly a colony on the margins of the French empire and now a French overseas department, a status the island acquired in 1946 along with the French Antilles and French Guiana.⁶ These islands of sugar, which used to be known as the *Vieilles Colonies* (Old Colonies),⁷ have been the "repressed" of French colonialism, territories that had not been conquered militarily, where there had been slavery, and that did not belong to the great narrative of the *mission civilisatrice*. Their demand for political assimilation rather than independence has generally situated them outside of the great narrative of decolonization.⁸ It is from this position of "irrelevance" that I speak.

The formation of Réunion's society was literally the creation of a colonial act.⁹ In 1642 the Compagnie Française de l'Orient took possession of the islands of the Mascarene archipelago in the name of the king of France. There were *no* inhabitants on Réunion when it was colonized. *None*. No native population massacred, no military conquest, no heroic battles and defeats, but settlement, colonization, slavery, and colonialism.¹⁰ In 1674 governor Jacob De La Haye wrote the first law that sought to prohibit *métissage*, which was perceived as leading to degeneration and lack of discipline.¹¹

There was slavery on the island at the end of the seventeenth century.¹² In December 1723 the French state published the *Code Noir*, a series of prescriptions regulating the slave's life.¹³ Slaves, who, in the first years of colonization, had been bought in India, were now bought in Madagascar and Africa.¹⁴ Sugar deeply transformed the island's social and cultural order. The plantation became the crucible of "creolization," the process whereby individuals of different cultures, languages, and religions were thrown together and invented a new language, Creole, a new culture, and a new social organization. Sugar also affected the pattern of land ownership. Poor white farmers lost their lands to wealthier landowners and were pushed inland. The existence of an important

group of poor whites affected the ways in which race¹⁵ and class interacted.

Slavery was abolished in 1848. But the plantation system in Réunion expanded even more *after* the abolition of slavery, affecting the class and racial distribution of the society differently than it did in the French Antilles. In Réunion, the great demand for a cheap workforce *after* the emancipation of the slaves led the landowners to look to a large diversity of sources for their workforce.¹⁶ Indentured workers were sought in India,¹⁷ Malaysia, China, Madagascar, and Africa.¹⁸ Different religious beliefs (Tamil, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, animist), languages, cultures, and traditions were put into contact in a small space. In the 1930s, a coalition of workers and republicans demanded the end of Réunion's colonial status and the assimilation of the island into the French republic. Their discourse mixed republican ideals with working-class politics, articulating anticolonialism with workers' rights. The island became a French overseas department on March 19, 1946.

Sugar, bitter sugar, has shaped Réunion's class formation, and we live with its legacy.¹⁹ Today members of the wealthy white Creole families, descendants of landowners and factory owners, hold important positions in banking and commerce. Among the descendants of Indians, Muslims, and Chinese workers, some families have reached middle-class status and entered political life. The development of the civil service in the 1960s has facilitated the emergence of an important petite bourgeoisie, who earn, thanks to a colonial law still in effect, greater salaries and pay fewer taxes than civil servants in the metropole. The majority of the population—sharecroppers, tenant farmers, unemployed, skilled and unskilled workers, domestics, employees in the private sector—live on the margins of the postcolonial society. They are the descendants of slaves and poor whites. In the last decades, Réunion has been transformed into a "window" of French capitalism. Consumer goods imported from the metropole and the European Economic Community, commercial malls, cellular phones, all the gadgets of postmodern life, have given to the island the look of a French suburb in the tropics. The artificial wealth exhibits the schizophrenic character of a peculiar postcoloniality: the recolonization of a postcolony.²⁰ It feeds a certain French colonial nostalgia. It supports the fantasy that somewhere colonization has succeeded,

blending peoples from diverse cultures under the paternalistic control of French republicanism.

The paradox has been that the 1946 law brought more French people to the island than ever before. French civil servants have imported their ways of living and their idealization of European "modernization." They have conveyed with them the metropolitan conviction that colonialism ended with the Algerian War and that racism has not been intimately connected with the empire and French national identity. As French metropolitans hold the majority of higher-rank functions in the administration, the judicial system, and the university and schools, they have been intent on imposing their ideology. Réunion Island, which belongs to the Indian Ocean Rim, is thus in the paradoxical position of being an appendage of a European country in an African-Asian region, running the risk of becoming an obsolete archaism. Resistance to the recolonization of the island has taken new cultural and political forms: affirmation of Creole as a language, rejection of the ways of living of *zoreils* (the name given to French metropolitans), and the desire for a greater cultural, political, and economic integration with the countries of the Indian Ocean Rim.

To a certain extent, these facts about Réunion's history are, as Édouard Glissant has noted for Martinique, deceptive. I look at the processes through which the Réunionnais constituted, and are still in the process of constituting, their Creoleness. In Réunion, there is no lost community to retrieve. Our "imagined community" is still in formation.

There is another genesis to this research, which partly explains its orientation. It started in March 1986. The United States was celebrating the bicentennial of Ellis Island with a big party in the harbor of New York and the renovation of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. Magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time* were telling the saga of millions of European families who had come through Ellis Island to live the "American Dream." On the other side of the country, at the border between California and Mexico, between the First World and the Third World, there was another kind of "Ellis Island," the U.S. consulate at Tijuana, Baja California.

In Southern California, the border with Mexico was becoming the last "wall" against the "invasion of illegal aliens," the protective

barrier of a wealthy, white, healthy, educated group against a poor, brown, unhealthy, uneducated group. The *frontera* was entering political rhetoric, foreshadowing the debate of the 1990s about the meaning of citizenship in the country. The U.S. consulate at Tijuana was one of the sites where the battle to contain the “invading hordes” was taking place. The collapse of the Mexican economy, the civil wars waged by governments against their own peoples in El Salvador and Guatemala led people toward Tijuana, toward El Norte.

That year, 1986, I lived in Rosarito, a Mexican village on the coast some miles south of Tijuana. I was waiting for my entry papers to be processed, to enter the United States of America as a “legal immigrant.” Although I was protected by my European passport and by the knowledge that if I failed to obtain a visa, I would not have to return to a country devastated by war, my life threatened by death squads, without the hope of a job, I was, as any person waiting is, subjected to the small humiliations that go everywhere in the world with being allowed by a state to enter its territory.²¹ These small humiliations are intimately part of the immigration process. They are not aberrations, consequences of the employees’ moods or even racism (though these aspects play a role). They *constitute* the immigration process. They consist in letting one believe that *all* the papers are finally in hand and announcing at the end of the day that one must come back; of asking women candidates for immigrant status to undress during the medical visit and to wear flimsy paper dresses while waiting to be examined by a male doctor. One waits for hours, hoping, lying, dissimulating, sharing happy endings or crushing refusals to the demands. Families sleep outside the consulate to be the first in line. They have a look of enduring patience, the patience of the dispossessed.

Between visits at the consulate, I read. I read while watching the whales going back to the northern waters of America, watching Mexican families having big picnics on the Rosarito beach, watching every weekend the young *gringos* and *gringas* getting drunk on margaritas. And that year, as I waited for the next appointment at the U.S. consulate, among the many books I read was one by Michael Paul Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian*. I recognized in the book what I thought historical political analysis should be. The book remained

to me a model of research. My days in Rosarito were shaped by my reading of Rogin's analysis of how "America clearly began not with primal innocence and consent but with acts of force and fraud." The words were echoes of the paranoid discourse about the border with Mexico, the patronizing attitude of the consulate officers, and the arrogance of the bicentennial celebration. But these words also spoke of resistance, the possibility of critique and radical politics. I entered the United States on Bastille Day of 1986. In 1989 I was accepted into the Ph.D. program of the Political Science Department at the University of California at Berkeley, and Professor Rogin agreed to be chair of my dissertation committee. From Réunion to Algiers to Paris to Rosarito and Berkeley, I finally found the distance and a sufficiently foreign language to speak of the political history of my country. I also found the intellectual environment that made it possible.

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1

The Family Romance of French Colonialism and *Métissage*



This research emerged out of a number of questions I have carried with me over the years as a child and adolescent in Réunion Island, as a woman, a postcolonial subject living in Algeria, France, and the United States: What is a decolonized subject? What are the historical conditions of formation of discourses of colonial emancipation? Growing up in a former colony that remains dependent on France, I was haunted by these questions. Why did my anti-colonialist foremothers and forefathers choose greater integration with France rather than independence? What was the importance of the French republican ideal of liberty, equality, fraternity for the colonial movement of emancipation? The great narratives of emancipation weigh on us, imprisoning us, and yet they offer us the means to escape.

As a young woman, I shared with many the myth of a pure historical rupture, that moment through which the colonized would accede to a dis-alienated self. I then spoke with the vocabulary of historical rupture: only a clear, sharp break with the metropole would guarantee the possibility of constructing a decolonized culture and identity that would affirm its radical difference with the

legacy of colonialism and give birth to a purified identity, cleansed from the alienating, shameful elements of colonization. For lack of conforming to this ideal model, for lack of accomplishing this psychological repudiation, any emancipatory attempt was doomed to failure, any action inscribed in morbid repetition. For many of us, the notion of rupture and the “myth of historical rupture”¹ played determining roles in our conception of colonial emancipation. We exchanged a great narrative for another one. Rejecting the universalizing Western narrative of the discourse of rights and its historical complicity with exploitation and colonization, we sought theoretical purity and espoused the great narrative of anti-Western emancipatory discourse. The redemptive message of identity legitimized our contempt for the complexity of human relations, supported our desire for a clear explanation of human contradictions, and offered us a dream of regeneration through the rejection of past ideals and theories. We often confused radicalism with brutality, processes of identification with a search for authentic identity, political emancipation with a struggle for “roots.”

However, when in 1992 to 1993 I went to Réunion, thanks to a research fellowship, I realized that I could not fully explain why anticolonialists had, in this French colony, for centuries adopted the French republican ideal, why they had followed the path of political emancipation, why this island wanted to remain French. Neither could I explain the violence of political *and* social life, and the reasons why French civil servants tended to adopt a colonial attitude quite rapidly in their stay. Or rather, I did have explanations, but they appeared ideological rationalizations once brought face-to-face with the complex, ambiguous world of politics. My confrontation with the social and cultural reality of Algeria in the early seventies, with feminism and radical politics in France in the seventies, and with the politics of race, class, and gender in the United States in the eighties progressively helped me to reconsider the approaches of my study. I decided to research the history of the political movement for colonial emancipation in Réunion Island from the abolition of slavery to the present. This is therefore a study of politics in a French colony and postcolony, focusing on the political struggle for emancipation and the reactive strategies of discipline and control developed by the French state and its representatives on the island.

As France still controls Réunion, it is impossible to examine the

political struggle without casting the state as a central character. There are other legitimate approaches, but to me working through this history appeared a necessity to untie the bonds of fantasized alienation and to reestablish a filiation. I wanted to confront a reality that deconstructed illusions, idealizations, and romantic images of struggle. I thought that it was important to work through the Western and Christian origins of these idealizations and romantic images. Years of militancy in anticolonialist movements and, above all, in a French women's group unfortunately removed me from any serious intellectual enterprise. They gave me, though, an experience that made me suspicious of any form of romanticism.² I learned that human relations could not be reduced to a battle of interests. Passions, malice, hate, vindictiveness, altruism, antipathy, and love play an important role in shaping human behavior. The desire for recognition and the aspiration for dignity have mobilized individuals and groups as much as the demand for rights.³

Two notions run through this study: "colonial family romance" and "*métissage*."⁴ Colonial family romance because French republican colonial rhetoric filled the tie between France and its colony with intimate meaning, creating what Freud has called a "family romance," the fiction developed by children about imagined parents. In the colonial relation, however, it was a fiction created by the *colonial power* that substituted a set of imaginary parents, La Mère-Patrie and her children the colonized, for the real parents of the colonized, who were slaves, colonists, and indentured workers. Lynn Hunt has eloquently shown, in *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, why one must pay attention to the "collective, unconscious images of the familial order that underlie politics."⁵ The "family romances" of the French Revolution "were metaphors for political life, metaphors that developed in response to changing events (and in response to long-term cultural trends), but also metaphors that drove the revolutionary process forward."⁶

Freud traces the source of the romance back to the child's "most intense and most momentous wish" to be like his parents, who are the source of all beliefs.⁷ The child, however, comes to realize that his parents are not the powerful persons he imagined. Freud argues that this fantasy is stronger among boys than girls because a "boy is far more inclined to feel hostile impulses towards his father than towards his mother, and, hence, has a far more intense desire to get

free from *him* than from *her*." Humiliated, disappointed, the child starts to compare and observe, to "replace faith with examination, eternity with the troubling reality of time."⁸ A "biographical fable" is invented, "expressly conceived to explain the inexplicable shame of being wrongly born, badly off, and badly loved and that fable still gives him the means to complain, to console and to avenge himself, in a single movement of the imagination."⁹ The child imagines a new set of parents, who are replaced in his imagination by persons of better birth. By associating this notion and the metaphor of social and political organization, the family, Hunt presents "both a narrative and a mode of knowledge of the revolutionary event."¹⁰

The colonial family romance, I argue, derived its character from the French Revolution's family romance. The rhetoric of the French revolutionary community of brothers paradoxically justified the subjugation of peoples in the name of *fraternité, liberté, égalité*. The French republicans were convinced that France was bringing the republican ideal to peoples under the yoke of feudalism. In the prerevolutionary romance of colonialism, the relations between the colony and the metropole were not suffused with affective ties and metaphors of love and protection. Men went to the colony to find gold or bring the word of Christ. The "savage" occupied a complex site in the European imaginary, whether as a monster or an innocent, but there was no discourse about bringing a political ideal.¹¹ The monarchy had imposed patriarchal rule; the republic would propose a rule among equals, under the symbol of Marianne. The state would play the role of a benevolent mediator, protecting the children against patriarchal tyranny. The republic's protection would naturally extend to her colonies. Colonization was the expansion of republican brotherhood, and France was La Mère-Patrie, protecting her colonized children from the abuse of local tyrants. With this fable, the French state aspired to substitute an ideal model of filiation for the historical colonial filiation. Colonial family romance invented *one* parent, the Mère-Patrie, and consequently sought to impose a process of identification that rejected the reality that each human being has *two* parents. Colonial family romance established a founding myth, the myth of the "unique root" against which Édouard Glissant has argued.¹² The construction of an ideal parent associated with whiteness and Europe denied the dimension of race in the making of colonial iden-

tity. The fable gave France the means to console itself when colonized “children” would rebel and to repress the reasons for which they rejected her. It was their ingratitude, rather than her tyrannical “love,” that explained their behavior.

The family romance is the invention of children. Yet in the case of the colony, it was the invention of men constructing France as the parents of the colonized. Colonial family romance is therefore a romance created by the colonial “parents” who invented a single parent (La Mère-Patrie), a character mixing the feminine and the masculine: the castrating *and* protective mother. This creation had social meaning. The displacement of parenthood from the colonized parents to an abstract figure denied the reality of sexual intercourse between individuals on the island and situated the colonized as perennial children. However, colonial family romance was also invented by *revolutionary* men who embraced the ideal of fraternity and liberty and aspired to expand a social bond based on this ideal. The fraternal bond dreamed by metropolitan brothers was affected by colonialism and its logic of racism. Colonized men might be their brothers, but they were their little brothers. In the empire, fraternity masked the continuity of primogeniture—the law whereby the firstborn son received the heritage to the detriment of the other brothers and of the sisters. Yet this fiction was adopted by Réunion’s educated colored, intellectuals, workers, and peasants. They imagined themselves as the brothers of French citizens. And they appealed to France to protect them against the tyrannical power of the landowners. The latter defended an old regime in which they held the tyrannical power of the patriarch. Revolution had not happened in Réunion, the colonized said. The 1794 abolition of slavery had not been accomplished because of the colonial lobbies, the passivity of the metropolitan brothers, and then their defeat. An “ideological bond was imagined in place of a political project. . . . The French people, the Gallick Hercules claimed to be the *frère aîné* [the older brother] of the other peoples, which, while remaining in a minor position, exchanged their filial subjection to previous authorities against a probably more oppressive dependency, but which justified itself with the idea of progress invented by the revolutionary culture.”¹³

Yet because the colonial family romance was the child of the French Revolution, because it wanted to be a republican romance, it both suffused the colonial relation with familial metaphors and

offered the grounds to challenge French colonialism. It brought with it the republican ideal of liberty and fraternity, and the promise of equality among peoples. To that extent, though it limited their demands for autonomy, colonized Creoles would remain attached to the notion that France was their protector against domestic tyrants well into the mid-twentieth century.¹⁴ And the words *liberty*, *equality*, and *fraternity* continued to carry with them the utopian dream of a more just society. The colonial family romance did not remain fixed throughout colonial history. Its representations, its tropes, its discourse changed, but the structure remained. Its perpetuation was the result of the need to claim the inferiority of colonized peoples and of the peculiarity of French imperial discourse that declared colonization a republican duty. It played a greater role in the Vieilles Colonies than in the other parts of the empire because there the battle between the Old Regime and French Revolution continued late into the twentieth century. Even 1848, the year slavery was abolished in the French colonies, did not abolish the feudal and racist world of the plantation.

The family romance of French colonialism created a highly idealized maternal space, France La Mère-Patrie.¹⁵ Dependence and debt were the operative elements of the colonial family's dynamics. Its rhetoric displaced social relations determined by the symbolic and economic organization of exchange between the colony and the metropole and replaced them with the theme of continuous debt of the colony to its metropole. Colonized "children" had contracted a debt to France. My goal is to show that in the colonial family romance, the colonial *don*¹⁶ (gift) transformed the colonized into children permanently indebted to La Mère-Patrie. The debt was constituted by the ideals of the French Revolution, of the French republic. In territories where feudalism, barbarism, or backwardness reigned, maternal France had brought Enlightenment and progress. She would save her children and elevate them toward full humanness. The children, once women and men, would naturally want to pay their debt. The transformation of revolutionary ideals into maternal *dons* sought to deprive individuals of their agency. In the colonial family romance, children remained children forever. It was "full payment, forever. Because the rescuer wanted to hear his name, not mimicked but adored."¹⁷ To subvert the terms of the colonial family romance, the colonized

reconstructed the ideals for what they were: "A source of conflicts forever."¹⁸

The colonial family romance produced two *fixed* categories, the giving colonizers and the receiving colonized. Studying its idiom means distinguishing between what was given and what was not given, how the *don* of France was transformed and reinterpreted by the colonial romance. The "gift," Marcel Mauss has argued in his *Essai sur le don*, introduces an elaborate web of social relations known as the symbolic order. There is always the expectation of a return, accompanied by a certain security that derives from such expectations. In the colonial political romance, the *don* of France was presented as a selfless, generous gesture, a pure *don*, and yet there was a sentiment among the colonized that they were neglected *and* in constant debt. Deconstructing the colonial romance would thus mean determining what in the romance put the colonized in perpetual debt. Precious woods, sugar, minerals, bodies to fight her wars, none of this would be enough to repay France for what she had given. The debt was construed between two unequal groups, not between subjects who mutually recognized each other as subjects. The colonized, constructed as "receivers," were not recognized as equals, and thus their reciprocal *don* never satisfied the metropole. And the colonial *don* could never satisfy the colonized. To begin with, it could not be perceived as Mauss's *don* because the colonized knew that it was not inscribed in an inter-subjective relation between equal subjects.¹⁹ The colonized continued to be second-class citizens, and their countries remained under French colonial control. They *gave* to the French nation wealth, sexualities, sites to excite the European imaginary, and received slavery and colonialism. The debt that they recognized was what France *owed* them: access to the vocabulary of rights and the democratic ideal. Yet when the colonized wanted to act on this debt, demanding their inclusion in the community of equals, France refused.

I read the colonial family romance partly as the construction of colonial relations as a debt owed by the colonized to the metropole and partly as the fantasy of an ideal model of filiation in which there is only one parent, the republic.²⁰ Today, the language of debt has been rewritten as the "culture of dependence," the process whereby a minority wants more and more from the metropole,

which would like to wean its dependents. Réunionnais who receive welfare are said to have lost the “desire to work” and to revel in dependency. Dependency, it is said, breeds laziness and criminality and encourages single female-headed families. Matrifocality and dependency reinforce each other, experts argue, to produce an infantilized population, under the power of the mother. The rhetoric about dependency as disease, infection, and degeneration hides a reality. Réunion Island *is* dependent, economically and politically, on France. The space of autonomy that the island has won has been the result of long years of struggle. The French state long resisted any project that would open an autonomous space in the relation between the metropole and the island. Even today, the final decision rests in the hands of the French state. By invoking a Creole pathological dependence, the terms of the colonial debt are still operating: France is giving, giving, giving but receives nothing in return. The questions that one must ask are: What use is Réunion’s dependency for the French state? What functions does this dependency ensure? In what strategies of power is it integrated? How does dependence function? If French assimilation had failed, why shift the blame of the failure on the community that had been subjected to slavery and colonialism? The notion of colonial family romance offers an interpretative tool that allows a reading of colonial relations that takes into account the metaphors organizing these relations. It is about *reraconter* (telling again) different moments in which the metaphor of family relations leads to a new narrative of these moments.

In Réunion, the fable of the colonial family romance encountered the reality of *métissage*. To the European imaginary, *métissage* was a site of both fascination and repulsion. The poetics and politics of blood invaded European literature and sciences in the empire. To the colonized, *métissage* was a term that spoke of the cultural and social matrix of diversity born of colonization and assimilation into the colonial project. *Métissage* was a site of dispute, for the term contained at heart an ambiguity, an ambivalence that to some anticolonialists offered a radical challenge to the process of mono-identification and European racism, and to others meant the disappearance of differences and a lapse of memory.

The question is whether *métissage* was a subversive notion in Réunion or another form of assimilation. In her autobiographical novel *Métisse*, the Réunionnais writer Monique Boyer both ac-

knowledge *and* disavowed the origins of the island's population. A fully accepted *métissage*, she has said, would be built only on the withering away of the memory of slavery: "Every Réunionnais knows about his or her *métissage* but all have a difficulty *forgetting slavery*."²¹ The story of her parents was the story of the island, a story of exile, separation, violence, and forced silence, but the conflictual history has ended with her, the *métis* child.²² Slavery has become a "tragic," traumatic event that it is better to forget for the sake of reconciliation than to remember as a *constitutive* reality. Slavery was *the secret de famille*. Amnesia was the operative word.

Postcolonial discourse has criticized the notion of *métissage* and preferred the notions of grafting,²³ hybridity, rhizome, creolization, *peuple banyan*.²⁴ Édouard Glissant, though he wrote that *métissage*, which opposes essentialism,²⁵ is a "proposition" in which the glorification of a "unique origin, race being its guardian," is inoperative, has favored the notion of "creolization."²⁶ Creolization describes the cultures and identities forged through the plantation economic system, insularity, the permanence of Africanness, orality, the role of sugarcane, corn, and chili.²⁷ To Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *métissage* is a "form of nationality that would resolve the deep racial and cultural conflicts by means of a reduction or synthesis."²⁸ In the empire, *métissage* was both a fact—biological mixing—and a value—the colonized's condemnation of pure blood ideology and the expression of colonial anxiety.²⁹ Soon associated with the discourse of racial harmony and reconciliation, *métissage* lost what had once been its radical dimension. It became synonymous with denial and compromise. It was about *two* elements (black/white, Asian/white), whereas hybridity, creolization, *peuple banyan*, insisted on multiplicity, temporalities, excesses, disruptions. The continuing contest about *métissage*, its unstable foundations and constant renegotiation, shows how the term remains fundamentally charged with ambivalence. I have nonetheless focused on the notion of *métissage* because of its history as a source of anxiety and a site of rhetorical subversion in the empire.³⁰

My reasons for adopting *métissage* as a focal concept have to do with the fact that *métissage* was developed *in the colonial world* as a response to European racism and the discourse of mono-ethnicism, of blood and nation. Little or no attention has been given to the reasons why *métissage* awakened anxiety. The colonial anxiety that this term historically brought up, signified, I contend, more than

just a desire to absorb differences, an appeal to symbiosis, the wish to erase differences. Reading colonial anxiety about *métissage* reveals the ways in which legal, medical, and political discourses manipulated the signification of sexual relations in the empire.³¹ The fear of, and desire for, *métissage* is inscribed in the history of human societies.³² Although what accounts for these variations has not yet been the object of a comprehensive study, it seems that what has remained constant has been a suspicion about the loyalty of the *métis* because of their “division.” And it is this suspicion that, I think, makes the narrative of *métissage* as a poetics and politics of blood inseparable from the dominant narrative about identity, the narrative of authenticity, and inseparable from the colonial world and its narrative of segregation.

To compound the difficulty, it is clear that the “West” is now not really disturbed with the addition of the *métis*’ voice to the choir of the postcolonial world. There is no reason to “share the white man’s helplessly hypocritical attitudes towards the time-honoured and universal mingling.”³³ Global capitalism can absorb *métissage* as another commodity.³⁴ *Métissage* has become a trope in European advertising, business, and the media to signify the new globalization of the world, its fundamental unity under the sign of capital. The social organization of slavery and colonialism produced *métissage*, that is, an intermixing of groups, new cultural forms, new languages, and an identity that remained indecisive. Now the discourse of global capitalism has adopted *métissage* as a new cultural commodity. People are forced to emigrate in search of jobs, to escape war and political persecution, and they come to the metropole, the megapoles of the North and the South. The new social formations can be called *métissées*, a challenge to the narrowness of the nation-state, a celebration of the migrant as the postmodern individual, between languages and cultures, capable of learning new skills, of moving freely in the “global village,” as long as the division of labor is preserved, as long as the *métis* remains a consumer, a worker, or an intellectual, or even a capitalist—in other words, as long as the symbolic filiation, to the slave, the indentured worker, the migrant worker, is not affirmed politically and culturally. Hence the “regional diversity” of a tropical, exotic island would not threaten the national unity of France.³⁵ Réunion, represented as an Eden, could become a model society in which cultural

and ethnic differences are harmoniously mixed, a “dreamt society, without class violence or revolt.”³⁶

Thinking *métissage*, I argue, requires accepting a genealogy and a heritage. In other words, the recognition of a past of rape, violence, slavery, and the recognition of our own complicity with the wicked ways of the world. No projection onto the Other, no denial of one’s complicity. Projection—“this process whereby qualities, feelings, wishes or even objects which the subject refuses to recognize or rejects in herself or himself are expelled from the self and located in another person or thing”³⁷—allows a denial but perpetuates the split and the denial of the primal scene. To recognize the split in oneself means to accept that one can have conflicting desires and wishes, that an object can be both desired and rejected, that love and hate, envy and jealousy, are part of the human condition. To acknowledge the primal scene is to accept that one was born of sexual intercourse between a man and a woman and in the colony between white and black parents, whether the sexual intercourse was violent or loving. It signifies the rejection of the colonial family romance.

In the 1950s, Octave Mannoni, Frantz Fanon, and Albert Memmi transformed the paradigm of colonial studies. Until then, the colonizer had been seen as a benevolent missionary whose task was to study, discipline, and educate the native. The couple colonizer/colonized rested on the understanding that the colonizer had no other motives than the “development” of the native. Whether the native was conceptualized as backward (School of Algiers) or as Other (Hardy) did not make much difference. Starting with Mannoni, the couple colonizer/colonized was understood differently. Mannoni’s more important contribution was to show the stake of colonial parents in the colonial family romance. His “Prospero” embodied “colonial paternalism with its pride, its neurotic impatience and its need of domination.”³⁸ Fanon said that there was a dual narcissism at play in the colony, which sealed the white man in his whiteness and the black man in his blackness.³⁹ Memmi concurred and wrote that the colonial relation was one that “chained the colonizer and the colonized into an implacable dependence.”⁴⁰ Advocates of colonization had argued that if colonization did not work, it was because “bad” administrators and “mediocre” colonists were sent to the colony. This argument was challenged. The colo-

nial relation *demanded* such people, Mannoni, Fanon, and Memmi claimed. The “white colonial is motivated only by a desire to put an end to a feeling of unsatisfaction on the level of Adlerian overcompensation,” Fanon remarked.⁴¹ Going to a colony was “simply a voyage towards an easier life.”⁴² The violence of the natives was thus no longer an atavistic psychological trait, but the result of the colonial relation. With this epistemological shift, the gaze was turned on the dynamics of the colonial relation.

Exploring the narrative of *métissage*, I try to show how it justified policies of discipline and control in the colony. But I also show how it was a response *from the colonial world* against European racism, eugenics, and mono-ethnicism. In the tension provoked by the irruption of a name in the colonial space—*métis*, Creole—and in the debates that follow, a space emerged that was not entirely dominated or contaminated by colonialism. More interested in the colonized’s creative response to the colonizing discourse than in the colonizer’s representations of the Other, I have focused on the Réunion community. The Réunionnais are still constituting themselves through the experience of articulating their being-in-common, of living groups that are continuously transformed by the arrival of new groups.⁴³ When the cultural reference of a community is a *métissage* forged through slavery, *marronnage*, workers’ struggles against capitalism and colonialism, and refusal to submit to racial regulations that forbade *métissage*, then the “people” are not defined by a founding myth but elaborated through a continuous social transformation, informed by resistance to incorporation.

Joan Scott has argued that “treating the emergence of a new identity as a discursive event is not to introduce a new form of linguistic determinism, nor to deprive subjects of agency. It is to refuse a separation between ‘experience’ and language and to insist instead on the *productive quality of discourse*.”⁴⁴ Discourses of emancipation, whether emancipation was said to be further autonomy from the metropole or more integration with the metropole, whether emancipation was connected to working-class politics or to bourgeois fraternity, produced an *ideal* of what the Creole was and must be. A genealogy of these discourses reveals both the “discursive space of the positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the ‘space-off,’ the elsewhere, of those discourses.”⁴⁵ As the discursive strategies of the past continue “secretly to animate the present, the task of the genealogist is to identify recurring

figures, reversals, errors, and false appraisals.”⁴⁶ I read the texts of the colonial family romance *with* novels and iconography, with texts from different disciplines, law, medicine, psychology, and with contemporary debates. I followed what Antoine de Baecque has called “nonquantitative serial history,” bringing together in a dialogue diverse sources that, though they “are not born free and equal, nonetheless enjoy a *right* to the same multicultural consideration, a *right* to be linked together within a heterogeneous but coherent whole, accessible to a single interpretative gaze.”⁴⁷

The point of departure was to gather “documents,” defined by Michel Foucault as “not the fortunate tools of a history that is primarily and fundamentally *memory*,” “inert material,” but material that will provide “unities, totalities, series, relations.”⁴⁸ The reading of colonial archives offered a body of texts, allegories, and tropes produced by discourses that both gave enunciative practices of emancipation to the inhabitants of Réunion Island *and* reinscribed them in a global economy of signs. As the identity of the Réunionnais was partly constructed within the French symbolic system, it was to a certain extent bound within that system. The tension between speaking a discourse and being held under the power of this discourse proved to be paradoxically a site of creativity. This approach has been challenged because, its critics have argued, it denied the possibility of entirely escaping the colonial system of signs, of creating a system of signs free of past influences. Such critics have preferred to follow a Fanonian approach. But Fanon and those influenced by him tried to disentangle the colonizer/colonized couple in an effort from which this research departs. Fanon thought that decolonization had to be a *tabula rasa*, that it was “quite simply the replacing of a certain ‘species’ of men by another ‘species’ of men,” an “absolute substitution.”⁴⁹ Hybridity and syncretism were impossible positions: “The intellectual who is Arab and French, or Nigerian and English, when he comes up against the need to take on two nationalities, chooses, if he wants to remain true to himself, the negation of one of these determinations.” Any analysis that would read colonial history as a discontinuous chain of ambivalent and subversive moments, rather than as a series of decisive moments of rupture, would mask the reality that the colonial world was the “murderous and decisive struggle between two protagonists.”⁵⁰

The rejection of imperialism’s signifying system proposed by

Fanon supposes that the possibility exists of creating an entirely new signifying system. Fanonian theory depends on a system that organizes history as a progressive development. It implies that women and men have the power to reinvent their symbolic and material world, to shed memories. It construes memory as a morbid legacy, a melancholic nostalgia for a past long gone, shackles that hinder the path to freedom. In this approach is a fantasy of self-engendering, of refusing a filiation that is experienced as impossible to receive and to transform.⁵¹ Memory is a wounded memory, and the wound seems impossible to heal, to be integrated as history. This might have been what Fanon had in mind when he advocated a total reconstruction of the self if decolonization was the goal. We are reminded of Marx's remark that "the tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living. And just when they appear to be engaged in revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them."⁵²

Fanon, who described with force and passion what colonialism had made of women and men, wanted revolution to be a creation, unfettered by the spirits of the past who would burden the living with past losses and defeats. Revolution would be a means to negate these defeats. Yet Fanon did not discuss what was the *foundation* of his own society, the Creole society of Martinique, what was the *defeat* that slavery had been. A past of slavery, Toni Morrison has said, "until you confront it, until you live through it, keeps coming back in other forms. The shapes redesign themselves in other constellations, until you get a chance to play it over again."⁵³ This moment, this "loss," is constitutive of the present, and Marx's warning about the process of "world-historical necromancy" notwithstanding, the recognition of this loss is part of the process of becoming other, an "other" whose subjectivity is not contained in the colonial representation but transformed by its experience of colonialism. In other words, rejecting the self of colonization, when one has been subjected to the humiliations of colonialism, rejecting the shame produced by that moment, might simply be reconstructing a phantasied innocence, once polluted by colonialism.⁵⁴ I am therefore working with, and away from, Fanon. I want to save the father in slavery and in the colony, whereas Fanon

sought to kill the father and establish a brotherhood of the oppressed. I contend that in the colony, to have access to a metaphorical fraternity (the politics of equality), the symbolic function of the father, denied by the system of slavery and colonialism, must be restored.

The past weighs on the present, solidified in denial and disavowal.⁵⁵ It hides a secret. What is repressed in Réunion? A crime. What crime? Slavery. With what words can this crime be told? The repression of that crime through a narrative that claims that slavery was “not that bad” in Réunion denies the *reality* of slavery. The issue cannot be the “quality of treatment” but what was the symbolic and material economy of this system. Slavery was “undigestible and unabsorbable, completely. Something that has no precedent in the history of the world, in terms of length of time and the nature and specificity of its devastation.”⁵⁶ The fear is that if the repression of this history were lifted, there would be more horror. Horror was but no longer is, the narrative says. Why would one insist in showing the wounds, in bringing back this “tragedy”? To awaken the nightmare? How to put this crime on trial, a crime whose *reality* weighs on the present?

What has been the function of this narrative if not to absolve a group from its complicity in an event?⁵⁷ Speaking of slavery as a “tragedy” transforms this event into something that went beyond human intention, an event in which all participants were “victims” of history. And why should people “pay” for crimes committed long ago? It has been argued that no human institution can try such a crime. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok have remarked that if the epistemological alternative is between suppressing the reality of the crime and refusing the judicial system because it is arbitrary and relative, there is no way out. The participants in the crime would remain incapable of recognizing their participation and accepting a historical reality in its complex and multifarious expressions. The island is then like a grave, inhabited by ghosts whose presence haunts the living. Opening the grave, freeing the ghosts, mourning the dead, would be a start in the processes of anamnesis. Anamnesis is a different process from *tabula rasa* or morbid melancholia. One can start from the assumption that the “past has the value of representing what is lacking [*ce qui fait défaut*].” A group can express “what is still lacking, still to come, only through a redistribution of its past.” From the knowledge of the past, of the

conditions that made it such, a group can decide that what was lacking—freedom, equality—is still to come. History is always ambivalent, for the “place it gives to the past is equally a means to open the way to the future.”⁵⁸ De Certeau warns that because of this ambivalence, this significance of a lack, historical analysis may vacillate between conservatism and utopia, reactionary and revolutionary politics. Yet, as he concludes, one can understand both these limits and the potential of the ambivalence, a symbolization of the limit and the possibility of going beyond this limit.⁵⁹

The tension between a discourse of political emancipation that tends to essentialize a community and the discourse of *métissage* that is a deviation from this strategy seems to suggest that they cannot exist concurrently. But a discourse of emancipation that altogether ignores a situation of *métissage* would imitate colonial discourse, producing a community as a fixed reality that can be entirely knowable and visible. In Réunion, the differential identity of the island’s population was integrated within a universalistic discourse. When demands remained unsatisfied, they were reiterated but were still not “made in terms of difference; rather they [were] made on the basis of some universal principles that the minority shared with the rest of the community: the right to have access to good schools, to live a decent life, to participate in the public space of citizenship.”⁶⁰ Discourses of emancipation in Réunion must be analyzed in their heterogeneity. The strategy of borrowing was predicated on the history of the island. The people of Réunion first appropriated the “French book of republicanism” and its motto of liberty, equality, fraternity. But it was not a gesture of pure mimesis, of alienated colonized who credulously endorsed the Enlightenment project. The discourses of emancipation were creolized, *métissés*, hybridized. Xiaomei Chen has called this borrowing “Occidentalism,” the process whereby the “semi-colonized Self used the discourse of the colonialist Other for its own political agenda within its own cultural milieu.”⁶¹ Anticolonialists of Réunion admired the tradition of parliamentary democracy and the Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen, but as Jacques Derrida has said,

You can recognize an authentic inheritor in the one who conserves and reproduces, but also in the one who respects the logic of the legacy enough to turn it upon occasion against those who claim to be its guardians,

enough to reveal, despite and against the usurpers, what has never yet been seen in the inheritance: enough to give birth, by the unheard-of act of reflection, to what had never seen the light of day.⁶²

Within their discourses of emancipation, Réunionnais first challenged their exclusion from the community of the free and equal. Then they proposed an identification with the community of the excluded, and lastly they opened, as a new social group, a political space in which to act. These three moves affirmed the *heterological* position of the subject, and to the colonized, a position “in-between”: citizen *and* colonized, worker *and* citizen, member of the colonized community *and* member of a subethnic group, *and* women. This heterology was inscribed in the social and cultural matrix of race, gender, class, and sexual difference. It was a discourse that situated itself between suspicion (*le soupçon*) that signifies rupture and doubt, and filiation, that is, debt and the law.⁶³ In the movement between suspicion toward the ideals brought by Europe and the Enlightenment and the recognition of a filiation toward these ideals, Réunion’s anticolonialists expressed a heterological position. Hence the white *fraternité républicaine* of the Second Republic was a *métisse fraternité* in Réunion. Hence the *égalité* of the anticolonialist movement of 1946 was not only an *égalité* with the French citizens but also an *égalité* of the oppressed against the feudal world of the plantation.

In chapter 2, my analysis of the narrative of *fraternité* and of the contested family romances of 1848, the year of the abolition of slavery, introduces many of the issues that will be developed further in subsequent chapters, in particular the issue of political emancipation through greater assimilation with the colonial metropole. When slavery was abolished, when the white master was no longer the figure to whom total obedience and respect were due, republican France, La Mère-Patrie, became the figure to whom obedience and respect were due. The 1848 abolition of slavery and the rhetorics of freedom, brotherhood, and equality engendered ironically a new disciplinary power relation between France, La Mère-Patrie, and the small island. Through the literary analysis of the work of Réunion nineteenth-century novelist Louis-Timagène Houat, I present the limits and problems of the dream of a republican fraternity in which “race” would disappear as a marker of difference thanks to *métissage*.

Chapter 3, "Blood Politics and Political Assimilation," presents the narrative of political assimilation in order to incorporate it into the larger narrative of colonial emancipation. It was not simply the expression of alienation but an attempt to recover dignity and freedom. Anticolonialists sought to demonstrate the illogical position of the metropole: if France defended republican values and supported the right of the peoples to self-determination, how could it continue to retain its empire? The personal and public history of a political leader and anticolonialist intellectual from Réunion, my grandfather Raymond Vergès, presents the complexities, hopes, and limits of political assimilation. I follow Vergès from Réunion to China, Indochina, and then back to Réunion, from being a French consul in Indochina to being a leader of the Réunion working class and of the postwar anticolonialist movement. His struggle for political assimilation stands as a metaphor for the dilemma of movements for integration: placing on an oppressed group the moral burden of redeeming its oppressors.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Cold War period in the postcolony of Réunion. In the late 1950s, the demand for political autonomy triggered a violent response on the part of the conservatives on the island. Politically, autonomy implied a radical transformation of the colonial bond. It acknowledged the historical ties between Réunion and France but insisted on the need to transform these ties so that the people of Réunion would acquire political responsibility. In its psychological consequences, political autonomy signified breaking away from a relation defined in the terms of an infantilizing couple, *Mère-Patrie*/colonial children. A Frenchman, Michel Debré, led the countersubversive campaign. Arriving in 1963, Debré remained a legislative representative of the island for twenty-five years. A fervent Gaullist, Debré distinguished himself as a zealous defender of French imperial grandeur, a staunch anti-communist, and an opponent of women's rights. Cold War rhetoric was filled with predictions of panic, chaos, and loss of boundaries, which, in a small territory such as Réunion Island, found a resonant echo.

The last chapter tackles the role of the psychiatric discourse that in the 1980s gained an unforeseeable authority to describe Réunion's society. The nature and specificity of colonial psychiatry and its legacy have been largely ignored in postcolonial studies. But if psychiatry, as Octave Mannoni has written, "collaborates in the

enterprise of isolating and excluding from society those who cannot obey the historically defined norms of propriety,"⁶⁴ then the study of this collaboration in the colonial context is relevant. Although we know about medical discourse, a full investigation of the ways in which gender and race figured in the definition of the "mad" remains to be done. Psychiatry's goal is to define a "utilitarian policy, whose intent is to protect the tranquility of the majority, but also to inculcate in this majority a certain way of being reasonable."⁶⁵ The role of French psychiatrists in Réunion has been essentially to authenticate and certify the "illnesses" of the Creole soul and to inculcate a "certain way of being reasonable." Their goal has been to help track down the marginalized, the "abnormal" Creoles. They have defined a pathology, designated the culpable: matrifocality, indigence, alcoholism, social and intellectual poverty. The politics of integration developed by Debré failed to transform Réunionnais into modern French, but rather than analyzing the historical reasons for this failure, the blame was put on the Réunionnais community.⁶⁶ The adoption of psychological terms to explain behavior, the tyranny of the notion of the Self, the idea that internal life contains a "truth," have now come to the postcolony. The postcolonial subject lives under the psychiatric gaze and has learned the psychological vocabulary.

I have been asked why women's voices are so marginal, why men are the principal actors of my research.⁶⁷ Confronted with the political history of my island, I thought that I needed first to work through a narrative that, I contend, shaped the political discourse of emancipation. To the question of why I presented the history of the *men* of my family to illustrate the conditions of the formation of emancipatory discourses, the answer is that I located them in history; that is, I used their history, the ways in which they produced hatred and fascination, to show the central tensions of their times. The colonial family romance had for its main characters the imagined figure of La Mère-Patrie and colonized men. Colonized women were the repressed figures of this romance, and they were further marginalized as women qua women by the discourse of political integration, which needs for strategic reasons to essentialize groups, the "oppressed" versus the "oppressors." I could certainly have brought back in women's voices, made more central the figure of the *métisse* woman⁶⁸ (which I evoke); in short, I could have shown the ways in which women supported or subverted the

French colonial family romance. My task is more humble: as a feminist, I have tried to retrieve the voices of men who in my country have fought for emancipation, equality, and freedom, voices that I had neglected through my association with French feminism.

I have formerly spent years in a French women's group collecting women's voices around the world for a feminist weekly and a series of publications.⁶⁹ However, this French group showed little patience with thinking about French colonialism and its aftermath. Its feminism was Eurocentric, largely indifferent to women's struggles in its former empire.⁷⁰ I became an accomplice (and a subject) of what Chandra Talpade Mohanty has called being "under Western eyes."⁷¹ French women had been passive or active accomplices of the colonial project, and few feminists opposed it. Later, the feminist support of women's struggles in the Third World more than once took the form of "opposition to local patriarchy." Although justified, this opposition could not account for the common struggle against colonialism. "French feminism," as it became known outside France, has been remarkably silent about French colonialism and its relation with republicanism. If some feminist authors have voiced their criticisms about the situation of women in the world and about racism in France, they have in their majority practically never considered the complicity between French feminism and the empire. For the subaltern to speak, she had to work within her own history, away from the ideological discourse of European feminism about patriarchy and power relations. This is not to say that there is not a history to be told, the history of Réunion's women, of the daughters of the colonial family romance. For Graziella Leveneur, a leading feminist on the island, women must join the struggle for the reappropriation of the past, of historical memory, to resist the *altericide* (destruction of otherness) led by the French state.⁷² My reading is thus neither definitive nor comprehensive. It is an effort to retrieve a filiation, to lay down some aspects of the colonial struggle.

On this small island, very diverse groups, which were thrown together by the yoke of history, have built a society and a culture that are both fragile. Class divisions are sharp, and racism latent. The politics of emancipation are the politics of the Self as an Other, its logic a heterology. The logic of the Other is "never the simple assertion of an identity, but always at the same time the denial of an

identity given by an other; it is a demonstration, and a demonstration always supposes an other. . . . There is a polemical commonplace for the handling of the wrong and the demonstration of equality; finally, the logic of subjectivization always entails an impossible identification.”⁷³ My starting point was, and remained, the island of Réunion and its population. My contribution to the theory of the colonial relation lies therefore less in the domain of speculative theory than in the domain of political history through a slow reconstitution of metaphors, images, and symbols that mobilized the Réunionnais imagination. To understand the “concrete procedures by which social actors simultaneously borrow from a range of discursive genres, intermix them,”⁷⁴ and as a result invent original discourses of emancipation was the important concern. History is determined by material conditions *and* the kind of discourse that is adopted and disseminated. As Jacques Rancière put it, “What determines the lives of human beings, as much if not more than the weight of labor and wages, is the weight of names, or of their absence, the weight of written and unwritten names, of read or heard names, a weight which is as material as the former.”⁷⁵