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Abolishing the name of the abolitionist, chronicle of a disappearance. From the Schœlcher Museum to Musarth in Guadeloupe

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Brief historical data about Guadeloupe

The Caribbean Island of Guadeloupe and its archipelago were a Spanish colony for almost 130 years until 1635, after Guadeloupe became a possession of the Compagnie des Îles d'Amérique, and in 1664 of the King of France.

Although slavery was already present in the archipelago (also through the presence of white engages of Breton and Norman origin), the deportation of the first large contingent of captives from Africa is dated 1641.

1794: First abolition of slavery.

1802: The government of the French Consulate re-establishes slavery.

1848: Second abolition of slavery

1946: The colony of Guadeloupe becomes a French overseas department.

1982: Guadeloupe becomes a French region.

Brief historical data on Victor Schœlcher

He was a writer, a politician and a journalist.

He was born in Paris in 1804 and died in Houilles near Paris in 1883.

During his first travels in the Caribbean and the Americas, as a representative of his father's porcelain factory, he became sensitive and committed to the abolitionist cause.

After the French Revolution of 1848, he was appointed Secretary of State for the Colonies and wrote the decree abolishing slavery in all French colonies and granting citizenship to former slaves.

Still, in 1848, he was elected deputy of the National Assembly by the department of Martinique.

In 1851, after the coup d'état of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, he was exiled in Belgium and then in London.

He returned to France in 1870, when Napoleon III was deposed, and the Third Republic proclaimed.

He served in the National Assembly first as a deputy and then as a senator for life in 1875.

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In any genealogical narrative, whether dynastic or family-based, the "damnation of memory" of a contemporary or past personality is often achieved through the suppression or avoidance of his or her name. As a salient trace of a work and a life, the name to be suppressed or erased is the object of a denial of posterity that aims to prevent the memory of the person from lasting and having any impact. However, such a denial sometimes produces unforeseen effects: like the wax tablets that in

ancient Rome preserved the mark of the erased inscription, the mutilated lists and speeches become the indices of a history that is ultimately unforgotten, constantly reminding us of the causes that led to the disappearance of the name in question. This hypothesis will accompany me as I reflect on the former Musée départemental Victor Schœlcher in Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, renamed Musarth (Museum of Art and History), which reopened on 30 September 2022 after six years of renovation work. Like other sites emblematic of the island's slavery and post-slavery periods, this establishment is symptomatic of the conflicts of memory that heritage mirrors and that it can itself provoke or update.

When I learned of Musarth's name change, I was relatively surprised. Despite the fact that the museum's new catalogue (Musée Schœlcher 2020), under the old name, had already been published in 2020, it was a foretaste of its demise. During one of my last missions to Guadeloupe, in March 2022, I had heard on several occasions that, with a view to the imminent reopening of the museum, the name Schœlcher was posing a problem for representatives recently elected to head the Conseil départemental, to which the museum is administratively attached.

In the brochure distributed to visitors, the new museum is now presented as the result of a "transformation" that aims to "decolonise the way we look at" the history of the French West Indies and the figure of Schœlcher himself. Such a decolonisation of the gaze comes at a particularly sensitive time, when recognition

of Schœlcher's abolitionist work is the subject of controversy. These controversies are also fuelled by the political intention to institute other commemorative markers that focus on the role played by historical figures from formerly enslaved populations. In this context, for some years now, in Martinique and Guadeloupe, the memory of Victor Schœlcher has been the subject of questioning that can be very bitter, even violent, as was the case in Martinique, in May 2020, with the destruction of statues representing him: in Fort-de-France and in Schœlcher's eponymous town, and in Guadeloupe, in July 2020, in the capital Basse-Terre. In the Guadeloupean context, these iconoclastic gestures, while not supported or justified by the majority of the population, are interpreted by a number of my interlocutors as a riposte to what is known as Schœlcherism, i.e. the rhetoric associated with the "national" myth of Victor Schœlcher as the demiurge of the abolition of slavery in the French West Indies. A vision that is no longer recognised as irrefutable by part of local public opinion. While the official joint commemoration of Schœlcher's birth on 21 July and Saint Victor's Day on 22 July is still celebrated today, albeit in a less solemn manner than in the past, the memory of the "great abolitionist" has become a significant issue in a memorial, political and "racial" confrontation between "France" and its Caribbean regions. For example, according to an interpretation that I have often heard, particularly in pro-independence circles, Victor Schœlcher is considered to be the author, in the aftermath of the end of slavery in 1848, of a law to compensate

former slave owners that, in reality, he neither conceived nor supported (Cf. Balguy 2020).

According to the description sheet I was able to consult for teachers wishing to organise school visits, over the decades the museum has been given the task of raising awareness among pupils and students of the life and struggle of Victor Schœlcher, who in 1883 donated part of his collections to the Conseil Général de la Guadeloupe. The permanent exhibition is housed in a neoclassical building inaugurated on 21 July 1887 to mark Victor Schœlcher's 83rd birthday. In recent years, the building has been extensively renovated and extended to accommodate temporary exhibitions. Today, following subsequent acquisitions, the history of slavery through the prism of Schœlcher's biography and travels - to the Caribbean (1840-1841), Egypt (1845) and Senegal (1847) - and his actions, as well as his fights against the death penalty and for women's rights, are the main themes of the permanent exhibition, which ends with a general history of slavery and its end.

Since 2017, I have visited the museum several times while it has been under reconstruction and discussed its future with the two directors who have succeeded each other at its head: chief heritage curator Matthieu Dussauge and archaeologist David Laporal. During our discussions, we often talked about the symbolic place of Schœlcher in an extremely tense social context, where the museum's rendering of the past is confronted with a heterogeneous range of interpretations that are

sometimes opposed to the educational message conveyed, for example, during school visits. For example, within the independence movement, the image of Schœlcher as a humanist hero is readily apprehended by activists and sympathisers as a syndrome of continuity between the French Republic of the second third of the 19th century, celebrating itself as an abolitionist, and that of the 21st century, still glorifying itself as the bearer of the values of equality, liberty and fraternity. Such aversion is not unprecedented, but today it can take particularly virulent forms with, in some cases, the representation of the figure of Schœlcher as the "executioner" of the black people of Guadeloupe. This was the case during a "Self-reparation Day" organised in May 2021 at the Espace Filawo in the commune of Le Lamentin by the MIR (International Movement for Reparations) Guadeloupe. The day was devoted to a collective effort to raise awareness of the African origins of the people who came out of the transatlantic slave trade, and of the black role models who were the rebellious ancestors, activists and scientists who had to be set against the historical white enemies of these same people. A series of plaques described the misdeeds and illustrated the effigies of these enemies, including, under the inscription Démounaj ("dehumanisation", in Creole), a portrait of Victor Schœlcher, defined as an executioner, sharing the picture with a photo of the statue of Solitude. The romantic heroine of the 1802 anti-slavery struggle, from André Schwarz-Bart's literary fiction

La Mulâtresse Solitude (1972), was presented as a positive counterpoint to the reviled image of Schœlcher, which was accompanied by the following comment:

> "French hero. Abolitionist (?). Politician and man of light (sic) of the French people AFFIRMED "Negroes, coming from (sic) the hands of their masters with the ignorance and all the vices of slavery, would be good for nothing, neither for society nor for themselves". He thus established a hierarchy of knowledge and races. Quote from the 1830 "Revue de Paris"".

While this is not an interpretation on which there is a broad consensus, it does reveal a significant inversion: as the question mark in brackets suggests, Schœlcher's status as a liberator is called into question and, in the light of an extract from his first article on the condition of black slaves, his reputation is usurped. For several decades and on several occasions, such disputes have called into question not only the man Schœlcher, but also and above all the nation that was slave-owning and, for some, still colonialist. From this perspective, in a figurative and politically effective sense, the Schœlcher monument would protect "France" from its past and from a present that, for many Guadeloupeans and Martiniquans, is still marked by the unequal socio-economic conditions produced by the legacy of slavery. In this sense, the publication by the SGEG (Syndicat général de l'éducation en Guadeloupe) in 1983 of the book *A pa Schoelcher ki libéré nèg* [It wasn't Schoelcher who freed the blacks, in Creole] pioneered an anti-Schoelcherist pedagogy recounting another version of the end of slavery in the French West Indies and the memory of it to be passed on to new generations.

In the course of my investigations, I heard criticism of the rhetorical role played by Schœlcher in the political and social history of the French West Indies from people with ideological positions that were sometimes far removed from the independence movement. For example, in an interview in 2017, Jean-Luc Romana, president of the Lanmou ba yo association (Creole for "Love for them", i.e. love for the slave ancestors), described Schœlcher as "the totemic animal of the abolitionist narrative around which the relationship with French citizenship is ultimately structured" (in Ciarcia & Monferran 2020).

During a visit to Petit-Canal in April 2022, around the *Monument à la Liberté*, one of the stages on the Slave Route itinerary, I could see how a critical reaction could be provoked just by the mention of Schœlcher's name. When I was standing at the top of the steps naming the ethnonyms of the groups of Africans imagined to have passed through this place, opposite the monument built in 1848 at the time of the second abolition of slavery, I was approached by a tourist guide from the Istwavaj Association ("History of slavery", in Creole) offering me a guided tour of the site. On learning that I was in the company of the director and an employee from the Schœlcher museum, the guide was astonished that there was "still" a museum called Schœlcher in Guadeloupe, and began to disparage its founding figure. A lively debate ensued. The young man in his thirties said he was outraged that "we" could still celebrate Schœlcher and ignore the memory of the Neg Marrons who "freed

themselves all by themselves" and of whom he claimed to be a descendant. During his discussions with David Laporal, he listened with interest to the museum director on the issue of commemoration, of which Schœlcher has become a symbol. However, despite the clarifications and corrections Laporal made to his rather virulent comments, the guide, who was clearly used to contradictory exchanges, insisted on the issue of history being written by the victors. On this subject, he asserted his identity as, in his words, "a descendant of the vanquished". While demonstrating a very approximate knowledge of the facts, he used certain dates and references to support his main argument: the slaves had freed themselves without Schœlcher's help. When Laporal and his colleague invited him to visit the museum, the guide, who had meanwhile been asked to lead a group of tourists, replied before leaving that he would never have set foot in the museum. To Laporal, who calmly reproached him for wanting to ignore the facts, he added: "It's not that I don't want to look my history in the face" and, after a moment's hesitation, he concluded: "Everything in its own time".

Aware of the dissensions surrounding the memory of Schœlcher, Dussauge and Laporal, each following their own personal interpretative logic, expressed in our interviews their intention to examine some of the current memorial issues at stake in a museum that, like many others, is now involved in discourses critical of its genealogy and educational function. The attempt visible in the scenography, first

conceived by Dussauge, was to free the works on display from any rhetoric, and to insist on a historically grounded restitution of Schœlcher's political action, attuning it to the local effects of reception and to creative forms of reappropriation and reinterpretation of the site. The "carte blanche" exhibitions, held in an annex of the museum that was undergoing renovation at the time, and given over to artists from 2010 onwards, were also part of the cultural offer of a space open to temporary interventions that could forge the experiences that helped to shape Guadeloupean society. This "openness" was based on the idea of a complementary relationship between contemporary creation and the ability of the documents/objects on display in the permanent collection to establish a truth far removed from the Schœlcherist myth of yesteryear, but also firmly opposed to the militancy that immediately criticised the institution and the man who gave it its name. Convinced of the need to produce a French history that could be shared between Europe and the West Indies, Matthieu Dussauge came up with a scheme that would enable artefacts bearing witness to material cultures and artistic works to be displayed in the same places as the sensitive memorial conjuncture in which the figure of the French and white abolitionist played a part. However, for some of the objects in the permanent exhibition, such an inclusive undertaking was not easy. The motley collection of objects collected by Schœlcher during his travels in Europe, America and Africa, and the casts of works from different periods that he had commissioned, lacked any

identifiable common historical, aesthetic or anthropological denominator. It is therefore the political action of its creator that should lend a kind of biographical unity to the variety shown. Schœlcher's struggle, his collection of significant items from the anthropological heritage of Europe, Africa and the Caribbean, and the "classical" heritage of the civilisations of Mediterranean antiquity are linked to: "the genesis of the museum, Victor Schœlcher's youth, his study trips and finally the abolition of slavery and his other humanist struggles" (Musée Schœlcher 2020: 10).

For his part, David Laporal, following Dussauge's posting to mainland France, took over as director of the museum in August 2020, when the installation of the rooms was already well advanced and the establishment was preparing to open its doors once the health crisis caused by the Covid pandemic had passed. Concerned about the political effects of reception and management that the imminent reopening would have on the local community, Laporal asked Polymnia, an eloquence start-up based in the Paris suburbs, to make a film of a "trial at Schœlcher", performed by actors and law students trained in public speaking competitions. This educational drama was intended to become an interactive medium within the museum itinerary, but in the end, it was not integrated into the final scenography. The script is divided into two parts: one devoted to the theme "What place should Victor Schœlcher have in the history of the West Indies?" and the other, more topical, entitled "Should the statues of Victor Schœlcher be dismantled?" In both parts, an accuser argues his

case against a defence lawyer. For example, one of the defence arguments is that "the statues of Victor Schœlcher tell the story of the transition from a slave-owning France to a France on the road to egalitarianism", while the prosecution insists on the "historical injustice [that] continues in the injustice of remembrance".

As a counterpoint to Laporal's intention to question representations of/about Schœlcher through their "judicial", dialectical and public testing, the museum, by virtue of its identification with the Schœlcherist myth, was *ipso facto* apprehended by many of the people I spoke to as a still colonial institution. For example, some of the activists I met as part of my investigations into and around the RadyoTanbou pro-independence branch were astonished when, during our discussions, I raised the subject of the museum's forthcoming reopening. How could I have thought that this place, which they considered to be a thing of the past, still had some importance, bearing a vision of history that didn't even merit a second look? The Musée Schœlcher was seen by these interviewees as the emanation of a foreign power. In contrast to this radically antagonistic position, the artists - some of whom were sympathetic to the nationalist cause - who had taken over the museum in response to the "carte blanche" they had been given, were involved in creating an itinerary in which the memory of Schœlcher intersected with contemporary aesthetic expressions that problematised the French republican narrative on the abolition of slavery. In fact, during my research, I noticed that the works of some of these artists

- such as Joël Nankin and Anaïs Verspan - were exhibited both at RadyoTanbou and at the museum. I thought of these works both as gaps between relatively watertight spaces and as traces in the labyrinth of Guadeloupean politics and identity. Within this labyrinth, the disappearance of the name Schœlcher from the museum dedicated to his life and works is part of the wandering - and ultimately futile - search for a "just" and "true" memory. While the past of slavery and colonisation continues to inspire a wide range of uses, the commemorative fictions of a common national identity continue to clash with the logic of one or more coloured lines dividing the restitutions of these same pasts.

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In my oral presentation, I will analyze the recent history of the Musarth through the prism of another stage in the commemorative itinerary of the Slave Route in Guadeloupe: Fort Delgrès in the administrative capital Basse-Terre.
I will conclude with a few further thoughts on interpreting the notion of damnatio memoriae *in Guadeloupe and attempt to imagine some beginning elements of comparison with contexts studied by other researchers in the United States.*

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