



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

# THE MULATTO SOLITUDE



UNESCO Series on Women in African History





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Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

The UNESCO Series on Women in African History, produced by the Knowledge Societies Division of UNESCO's Communication and Information Sector, was conducted in the framework of the Priority Africa Intersectoral Platform, with the support of the Division for Gender Equality. This initiative was realized with the financial contribution of the Republic of Bulgaria.

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# 1 Introduction

## Spotlight on women!

The UNESCO Women in African History Series, and its corresponding website, aims to highlight a selection of key women figures in African history.

Through the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the project showcases 20 African women or women of African descent. It demonstrates that historically, women have distinguished themselves in diverse fields such as politics (Gisèle Rabesahala), diplomacy and resistance against colonization (Njinga Mbandi), defence of women's rights (Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti) and environmental protection (Wangari Maathai).

This list of 20 women represents only a small part of the contribution of African women, known and unknown, to the history of their countries, Africa and all mankind.

Through this project and by emphasizing the education, academic careers and main achievements of these exceptional women, UNESCO seeks to highlight their legacy and calls for continued research on the role of women in African history.

Visit and share the UNESCO website on Women Figures in African History:

[www.unesco.org/womeninfrica](http://www.unesco.org/womeninfrica)



Illustration by Jonathas Mello.



Woman of the royal court in Tiébélé.  
Photograph by Rita Willaert, 2012.



Photograph by UNESCO/M. Benchelah, 2012.

## Gender equality: a global priority of UNESCO

The Organisation strives to promote gender equality and women's empowerment by integrating these principles in all its programmes, notably in education.

Education makes possible the transmission of the essential value of gender equality: it provides leverage to enforce the fundamental human rights of women and highlights their central role in all societies.

As such, the teaching of history has a crucial role to play since it enables the understanding of cultural features, and highlights the social, political, and economic conditions in the lives of women in past societies.

## The General History of Africa

This publication is part of UNESCO's General History of Africa project.

Phase I of the project was launched in 1964 and completed in 1999. It resulted in the preparation and publication of a collection of eight volumes, a main edition, and an abridged version which have been translated into thirteen languages (including three African languages). A digital version available for download can be found on the UNESCO website.

Phase II, launched in 2009 and entitled The Pedagogical Use of the General History of Africa, aims to develop educational content in order to encourage the teaching of African history. The Women in African History project has been developed within the framework of Phase II.



Photograph by Almanaque Lusofonista, 2013.

## 2 Biography

### The Mulatto Solitude (late eighteenth - nineteenth century)

Born around 1780, the mulatto Solitude was a historical figure of the 1802 uprisings against the reinstatement of Lacrosse, who had been appointed Captain-General of Guadeloupe by Napoleon Bonaparte and expelled in October 1801 following a coup by the army's officers of colour. The little known of her is recorded in the book *Histoire de la Guadeloupe* (History of Guadeloupe) by Auguste Lacour (1805–1869).

In 1802, eight years after slavery was proclaimed abolished in Guadeloupe for the first time by Victor Hugues on 7 June 1794, Napoleon Bonaparte sent General Antoine Richepance to Guadeloupe. In charge of 3,500 men, he was instructed to reinstate Lacrosse as Captain-General, disarm all soldiers of colour, deport rebel officers and restore discipline among the former slaves. On his arrival, he ordered the disarming of soldiers of colour and made them board his ships.

In response, Battalion Chief (Commander) Joseph Ignace and Captains Palerme and Masoteau organized an uprising. On 10 May 1802, their fellow rebel Louis Delgrès, a native of Saint-Pierre, Martinique, who was Battalion Chief and Commander of the Basse-Terre district, launched a proclamation entitled 'To the whole universe, the last cry of innocence and despair'. The mulatto Solitude, a few months pregnant, joined this fight against Richepance's troops.

After eighteen days of unequal combat (between more than 4,000 soldiers on Richepance's side and around 1,000 regular soldiers on the side of the rebels), the rebels were defeated. Ignace,



about to be taken prisoner, committed suicide, while Delgrès and his troops blew up the Danglemont house in Matouba, where they had taken refuge. Solitude was taken prisoner around 23 May 1802, when Palerme's camp in Dolé was taken. She was sentenced to death and tortured on 29 November that year, a day after giving birth. This torture may have included shackling or flogging, possibly to death.

A female figure of insurgents in Guadeloupe in 1802, the mulatto Solitude symbolizes the Caribbean women and mothers who fought to protect the ideals of equality and freedom in the context of slavery.





# 3 Comic strip

## The Mulatto Solitude (late eighteenth - nineteenth century)

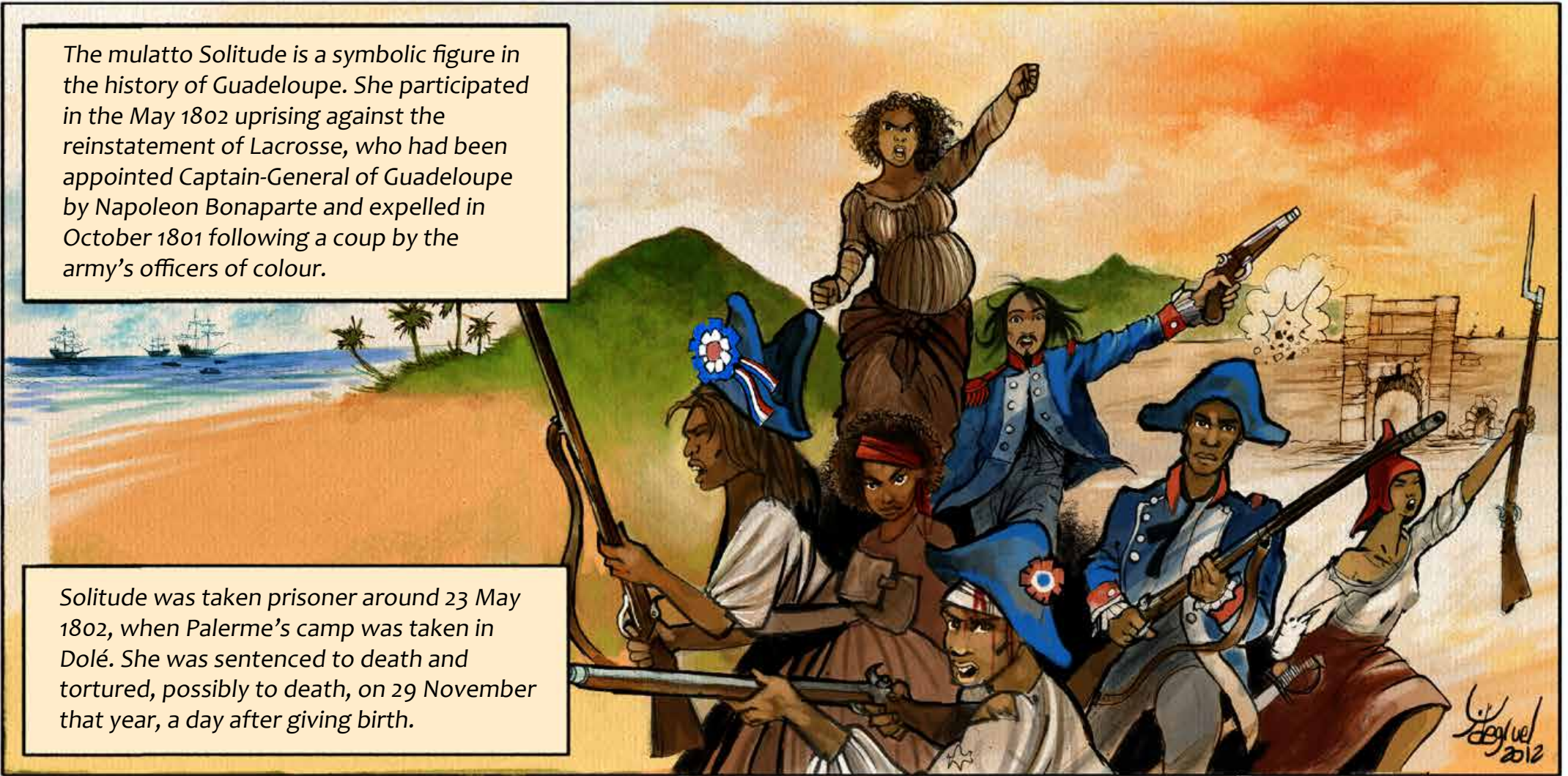
### Foreword

The little we know about the mulatto Solitude is taken from a few lines in *Histoire de la Guadeloupe* (History of Guadeloupe), a book written by Auguste Lacour in the mid-nineteenth century. The following comic strip is an interpretation of her story. It is inspired by Auguste Lacour's book, André Schwarz-Bart's novel *La Mulâtresse Solitude*, and the historical context of late eighteenth century Guadeloupe. The illustrations are based on historical and iconographic research into Guadeloupe and slavery. They do not claim to be an accurate representation of the events, people, architecture, hairstyles or clothing of the period.

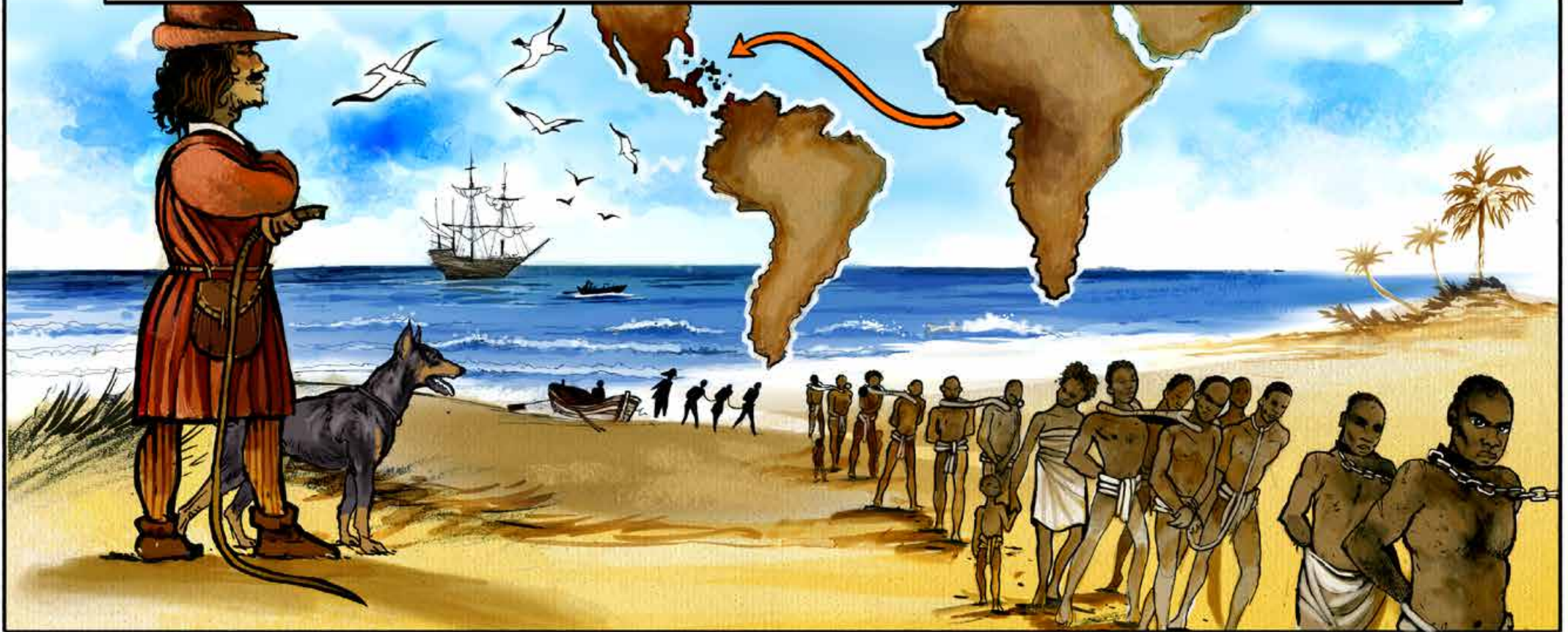


The mulatto Solitude is a symbolic figure in the history of Guadeloupe. She participated in the May 1802 uprising against the reinstatement of Lacrosse, who had been appointed Captain-General of Guadeloupe by Napoleon Bonaparte and expelled in October 1801 following a coup by the army's officers of colour.

Solitude was taken prisoner around 23 May 1802, when Palerme's camp was taken in Dolé. She was sentenced to death and tortured, possibly to death, on 29 November that year, a day after giving birth.



*Her story takes place in Guadeloupe, a Caribbean archipelago colonized by the French in 1635. After defeating the Caribs, the island's native people, the French established a slave society. The transatlantic slave trade enabled them to exploit African slaves and their descendants in order to develop an economy based on sugar cane, coffee and cotton farming.*



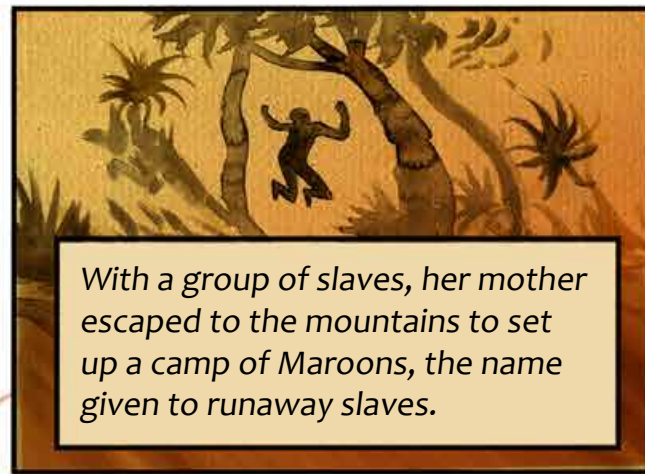
*It was in this context, around 1780, that Solitude was born, most probably from a black mother and white father.*

*Her mother tried to protect her, whose light skin determined in advance which category she would belong to in the slave society: 'the mulattos'. She was saddened by the idea that she would one day be separated from her daughter for this reason.*





Unfortunately, that is precisely what happened: the master noticed this little bright-eyed girl. He made her a servant, a higher category than that of slaves. Her mother could therefore no longer see her. She deeply sank into despair.

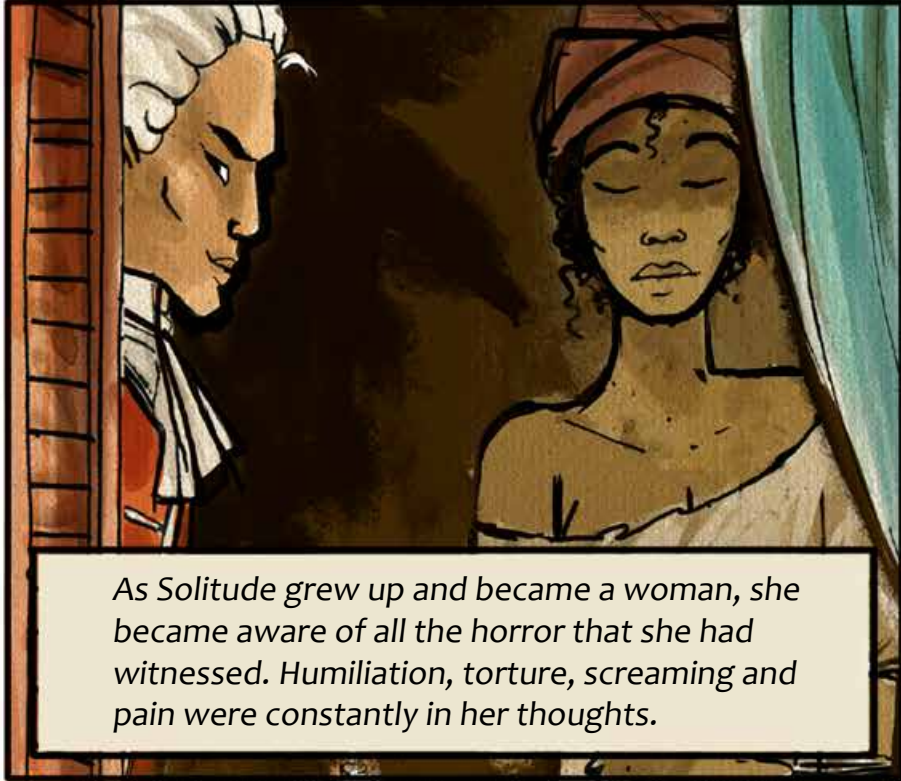


With a group of slaves, her mother escaped to the mountains to set up a camp of Maroons, the name given to runaway slaves.



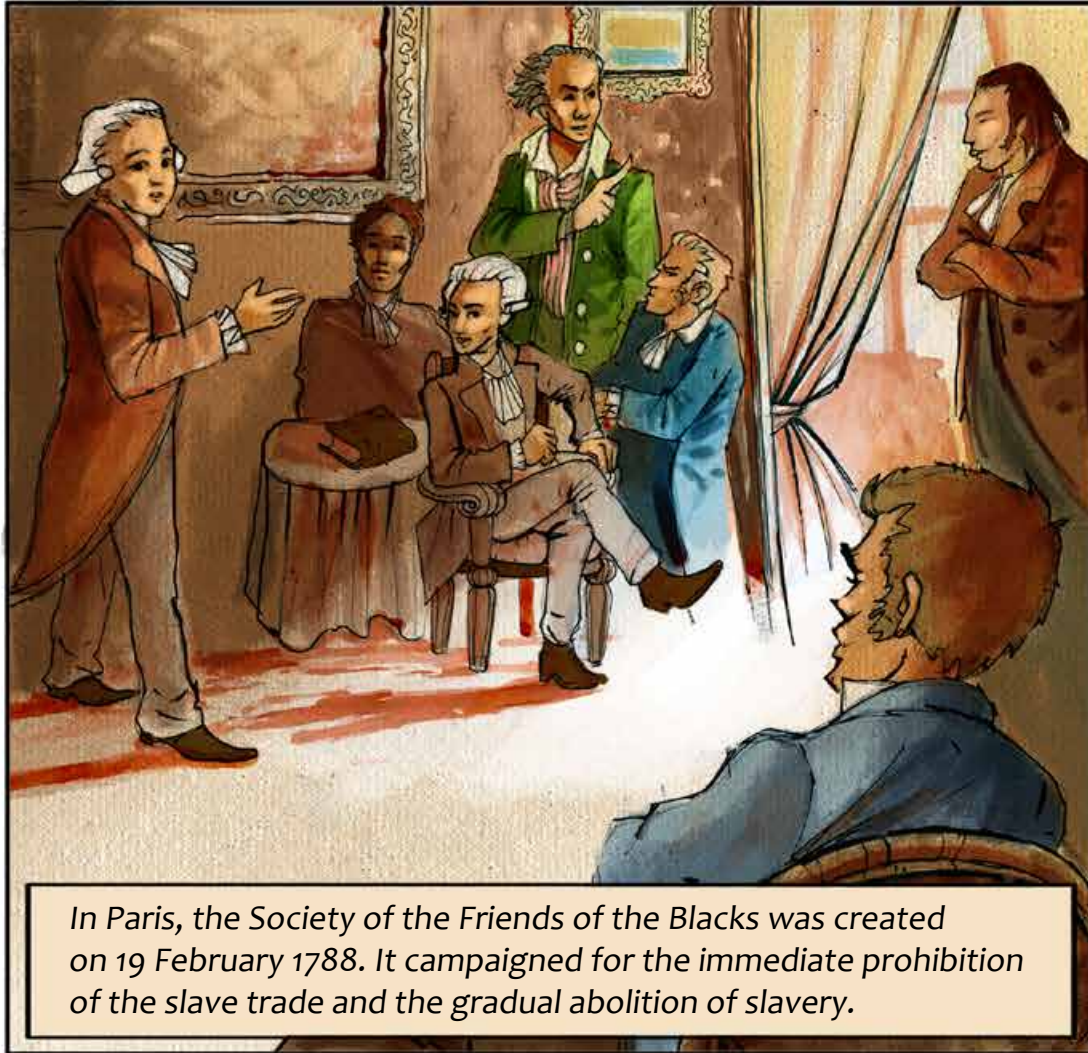
*Solitude was given the job of playing with the master's daughters. However, traumatized by being so brutally separated from her mother, she rarely spoke and often remained silent.*



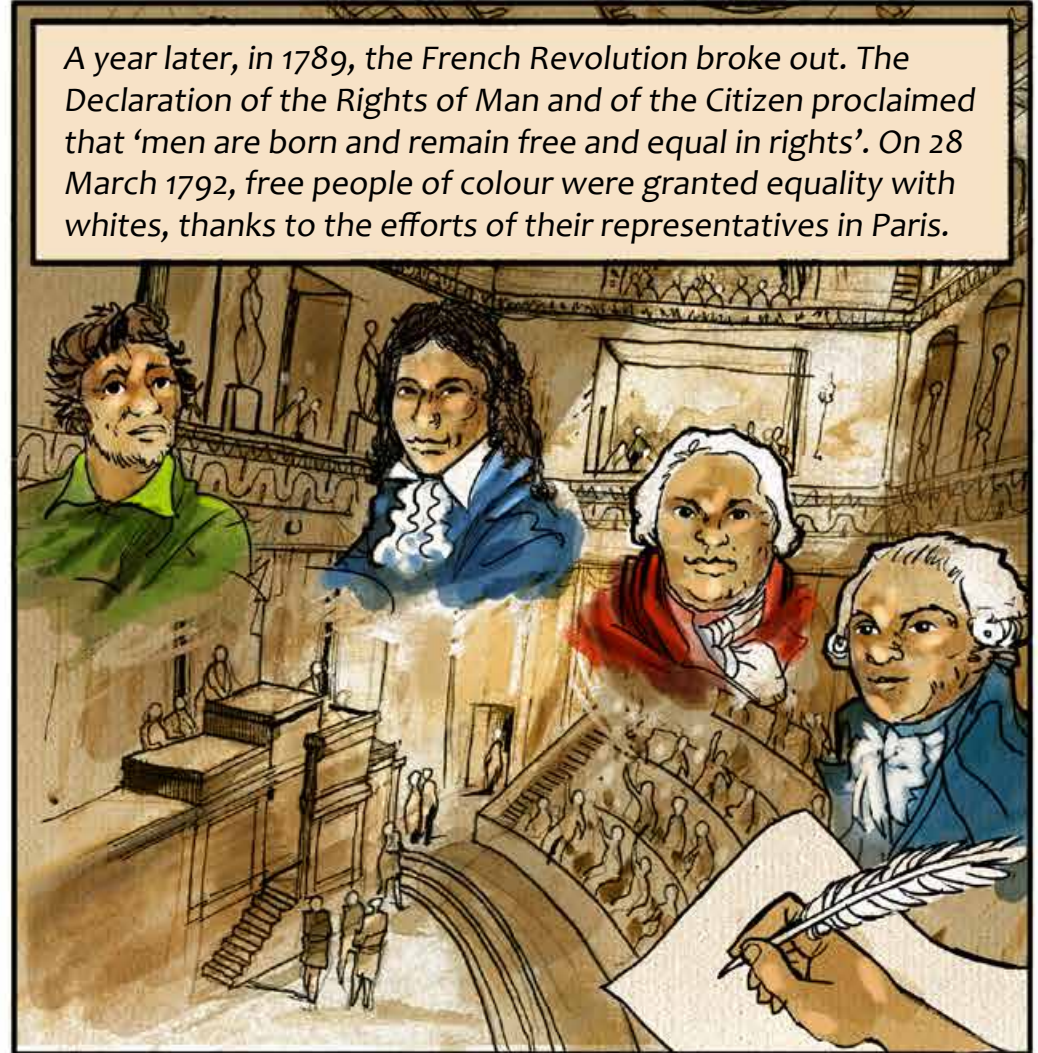


*As Solitude grew up and became a woman, she became aware of all the horror that she had witnessed. Humiliation, torture, screaming and pain were constantly in her thoughts.*





*In Paris, the Society of the Friends of the Blacks was created on 19 February 1788. It campaigned for the immediate prohibition of the slave trade and the gradual abolition of slavery.*



*A year later, in 1789, the French Revolution broke out. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen proclaimed that 'men are born and remain free and equal in rights'. On 28 March 1792, free people of colour were granted equality with whites, thanks to the efforts of their representatives in Paris.*

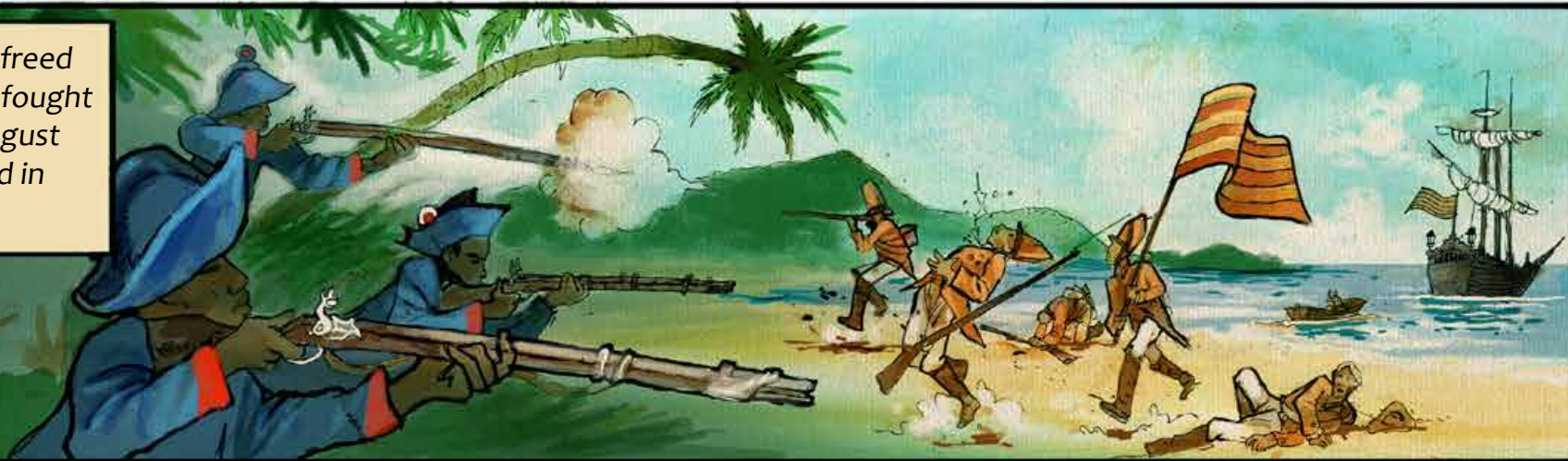




*Taking advantage of disagreements between their masters and conflicts between whites and free people of colour, slaves in Saint-Domingue, another Caribbean island, revolted on 22 August 1791. They destroyed 1,400 plantations and killed 1,000 masters in the space of a few weeks.*

*In 1793, Britain and Spain were at war with the French revolutionaries, who recruited numerous slaves into their armies and granted them freedom.*

*On 21 June 1793, they also freed the families of slaves who fought for the Republic. On 29 August 1793, slavery was abolished in Saint-Domingue.*



On 4 February 1794, France extended the abolition of slavery to all its other colonies. Governor Victor Hugues, sent from Paris, landed in Guadeloupe with his troops on 4 June. He proclaimed the abolition of slavery on 7 June.



Citizens of all colours!  
You have become equal in  
order to enjoy happiness  
and share it with all!

Long live the  
Republic!



It's over!

Free!  
We're free!

At last, we've  
got rid of the  
royalists!

The Republic has  
set us free!



The news spread like wildfire. Hundreds of slaves abandoned the plantations and hurried to Pointe-à-Pitre.

More than 2,000 blacks and mixed-race people signed up as 'paid-off national volunteers' within sans-culotte battalions.



*The black sans-culotte battalions showed tremendous courage in the war against the British, who occupied the island. As for Solitude, when she learned that slavery had been abolished, she did not join in with her friends as they danced for joy...*

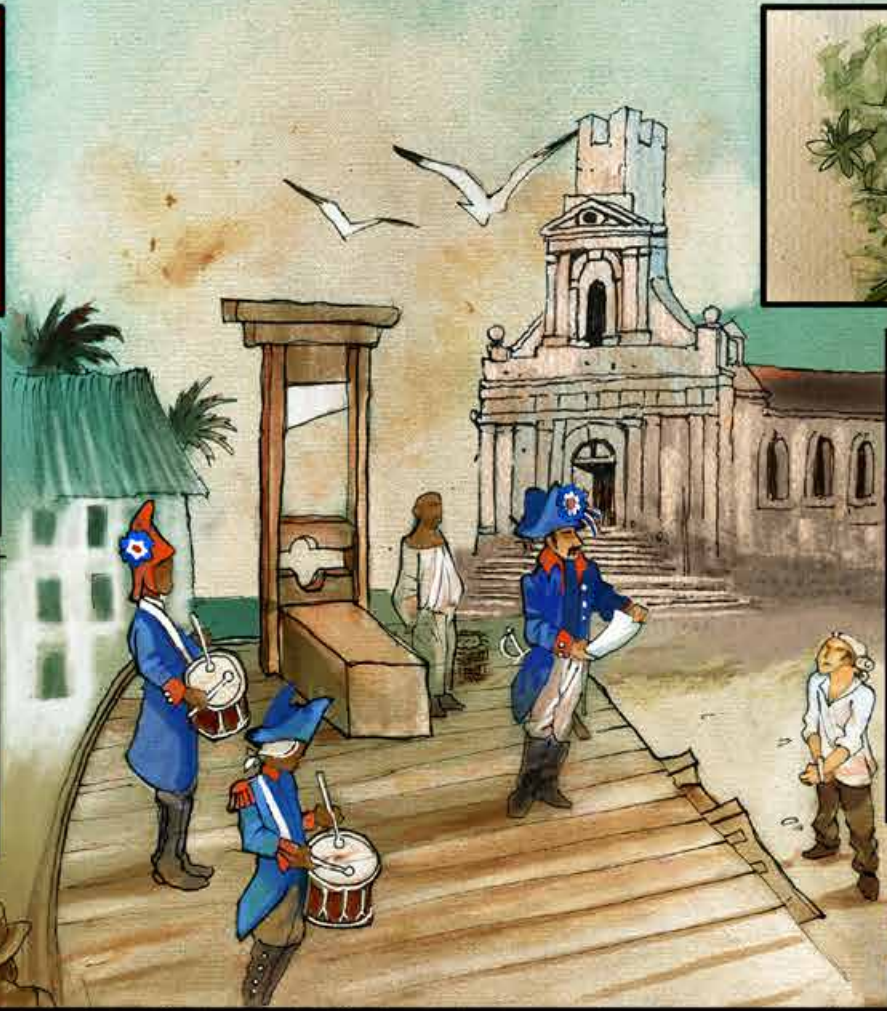


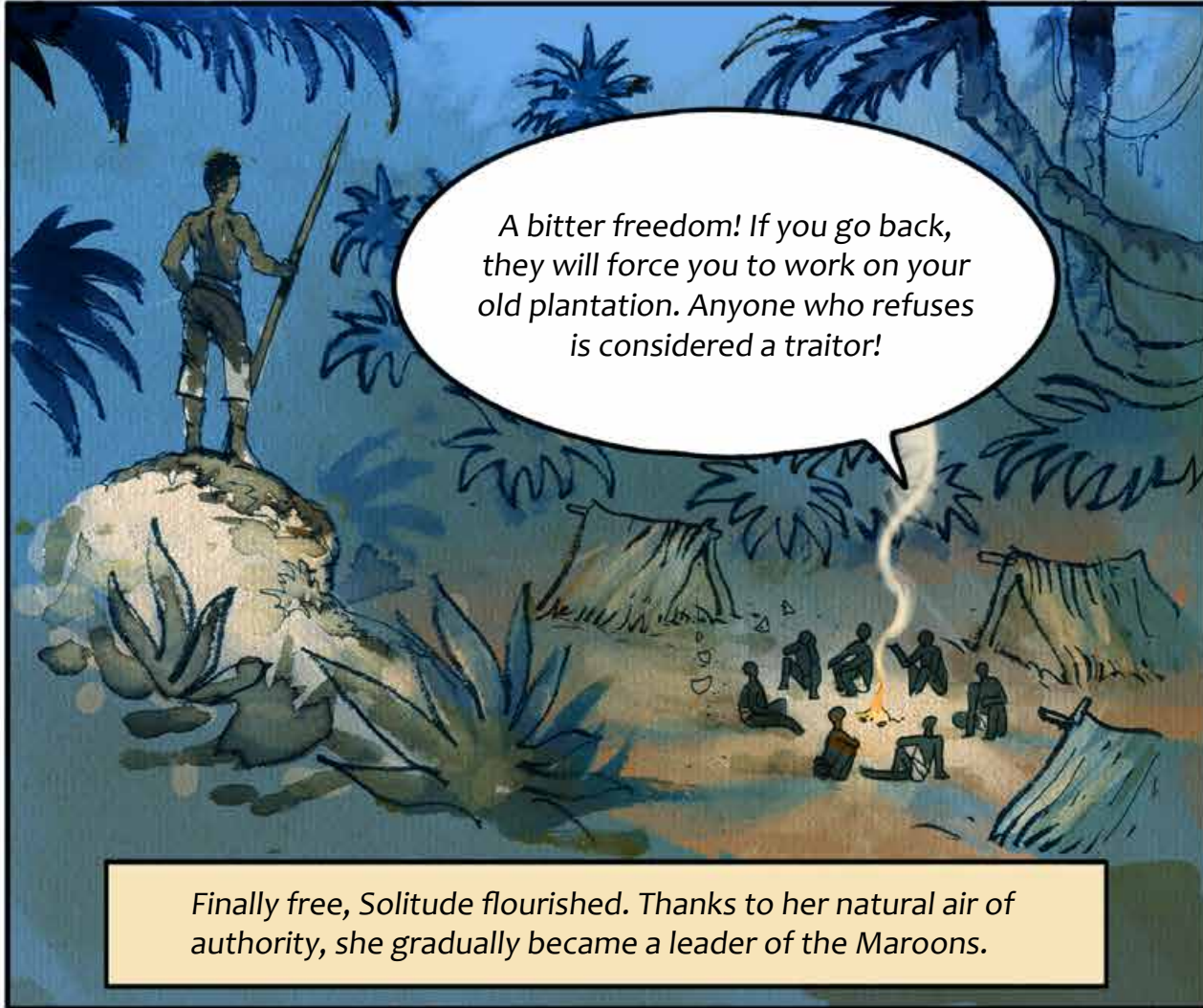


*... She attended the execution of the rich royalist landowners who had fought against the Republic in order to maintain slavery.*

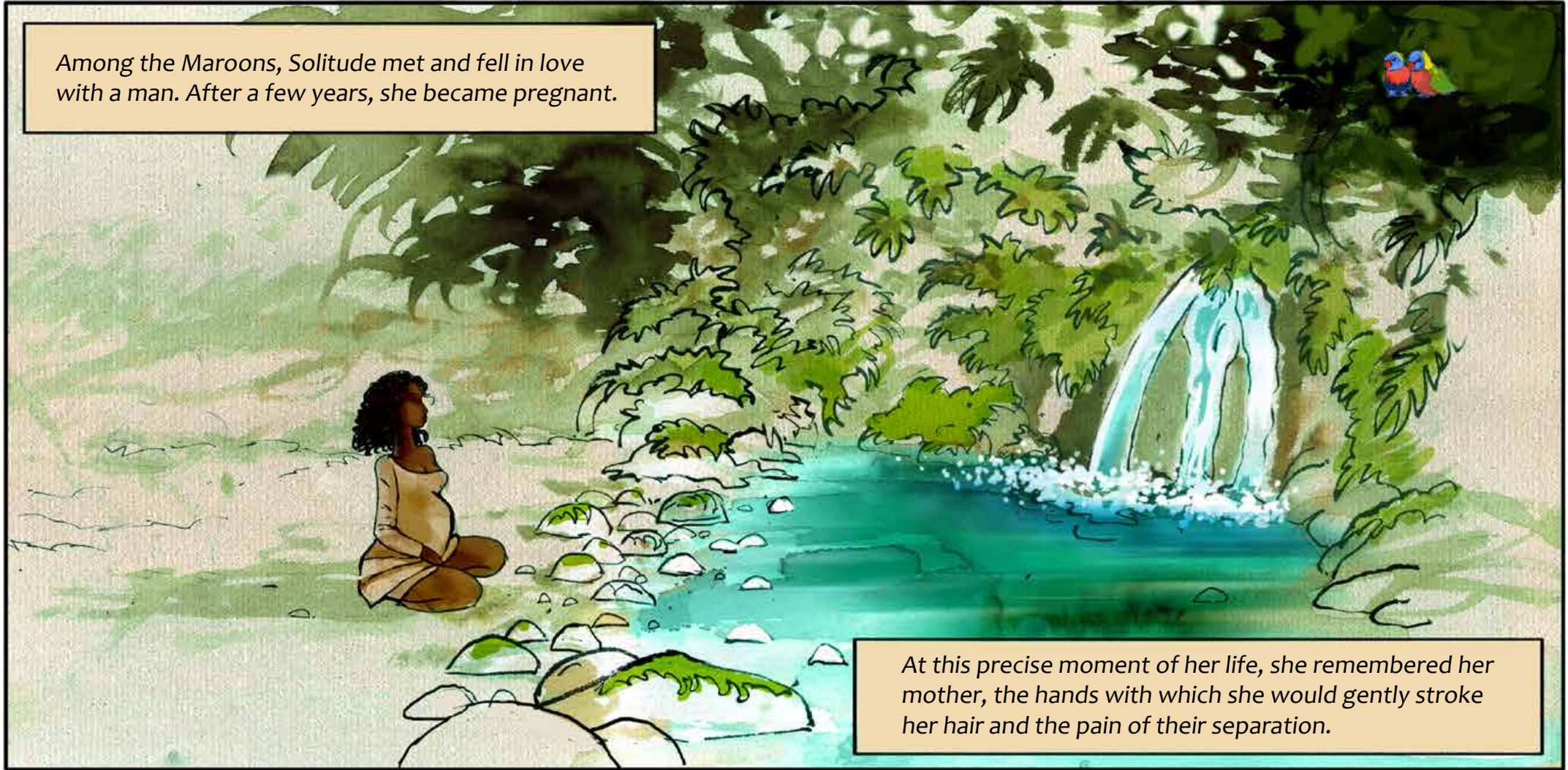


*Then Victor Hugues imposed a regime of terror. He replaced the previous slave system with rigorous military discipline and ordered freed slaves to remain on the plantations and work for their former masters. Solitude decided to run away and join a camp of Maroons in the forest.*





*Among the Maroons, Solitude met and fell in love with a man. After a few years, she became pregnant.*



*At this precise moment of her life, she remembered her mother, the hands with which she would gently stroke her hair and the pain of their separation.*

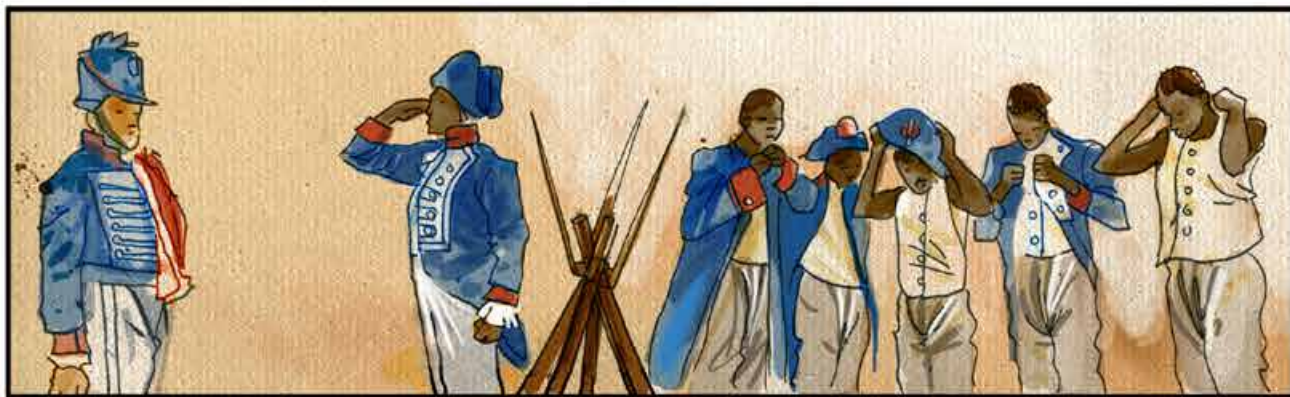
*In October 1801, Lacrosse, appointed Captain-General of Guadeloupe by Napoleon Bonaparte, tried to deport some officers of colour, but they rebelled and expelled Lacrosse from Guadeloupe.*

*Guadeloupe was run at that time by a provisional government led by Magloire Pélage, Chief of Brigade from Martinique with a mulatto father and a black mother. Pélage swore allegiance to Bonaparte's France. Even so, Bonaparte sent General Richepance to restore Lacrosse to his post and punish the 'rebels'.*

*The soldiers of colour did not know what awaited them on 6 May 1802 when, from the harbour in Pointe-à-Pitre, they joyfully waved at Richepance's approaching ships, arriving from France.*



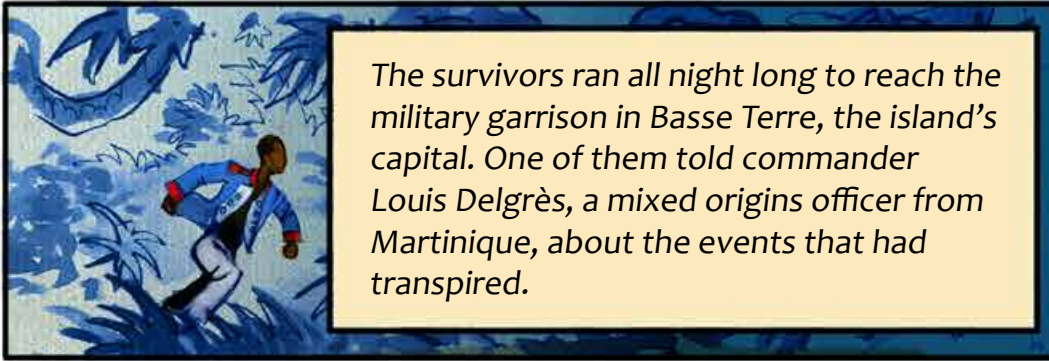




As soon as he landed, Richepance ordered the replacement of the troops and asked the soldiers from Guadeloupe to board the ships, promising that they would fight elsewhere. Some were calmly led aboard, while others were humiliated and beaten up by Lacrosse's supporters.



A wind of revolt passed through the officers and soldiers of colour who remained on land. Taking advantage of the general confusion, around 100 of them disappeared into the twilight.





Let's join Delgrès and prevent Lacrosse from returning!

On 10 May 1802, Delgrès launched an appeal for resistance and published a proclamation entitled 'To the whole universe, the last cry of innocence and despair'. Solitude, a few months pregnant, was in the Dolé region with a group of insurgents led by Palerme.



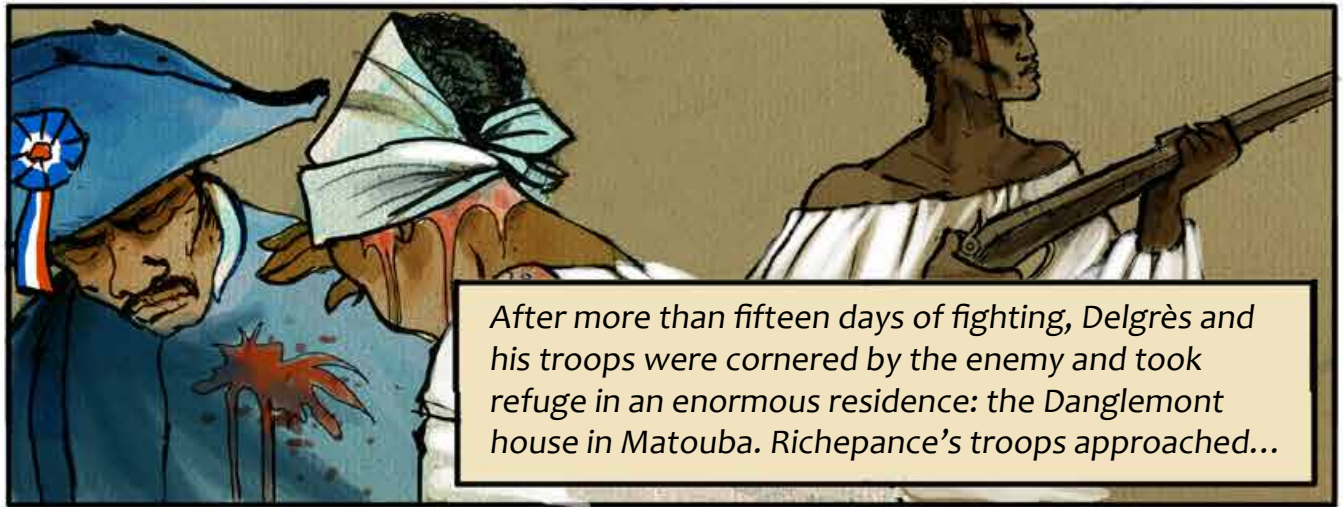
Freedom or death!





*Delgrès' appeal brought together several thousand civilians and farmworkers, including Solitude and many other women. During the fighting, the women showed outstanding courage and combative spirit. They carried messages between the troops and galvanized them, defying the enemy.*





After more than fifteen days of fighting, Delgrès and his troops were cornered by the enemy and took refuge in an enormous residence: the Danglemont house in Matouba. Richepance's troops approached...



Here we are, dear friends: no slavery! Long live death!

The house has been mined. If you want to leave, the door is open. The rest of you, stay with me and we'll set fire to the powder when the enemy gets near.





On 28 May 1802, the house in which Delgrès and between 300 and 500 of his men had taken refuge exploded, killing them and some of Richepance's soldiers.



Solitude, who was on her way to join the resistance, was captured with many other insurgents.



*Napoleon Bonaparte, hearing of Richepance's victory, consulted his ministers and decided, on 16 July 1802, to reinstate slavery in Guadeloupe in order to punish the rebels.*

*The next day, in Guadeloupe, Richepance removed the citizenship of men of colour. Lacrosse, restored to his post, never dared to reinstate slavery officially. His successor did so on 14 May 1803.*



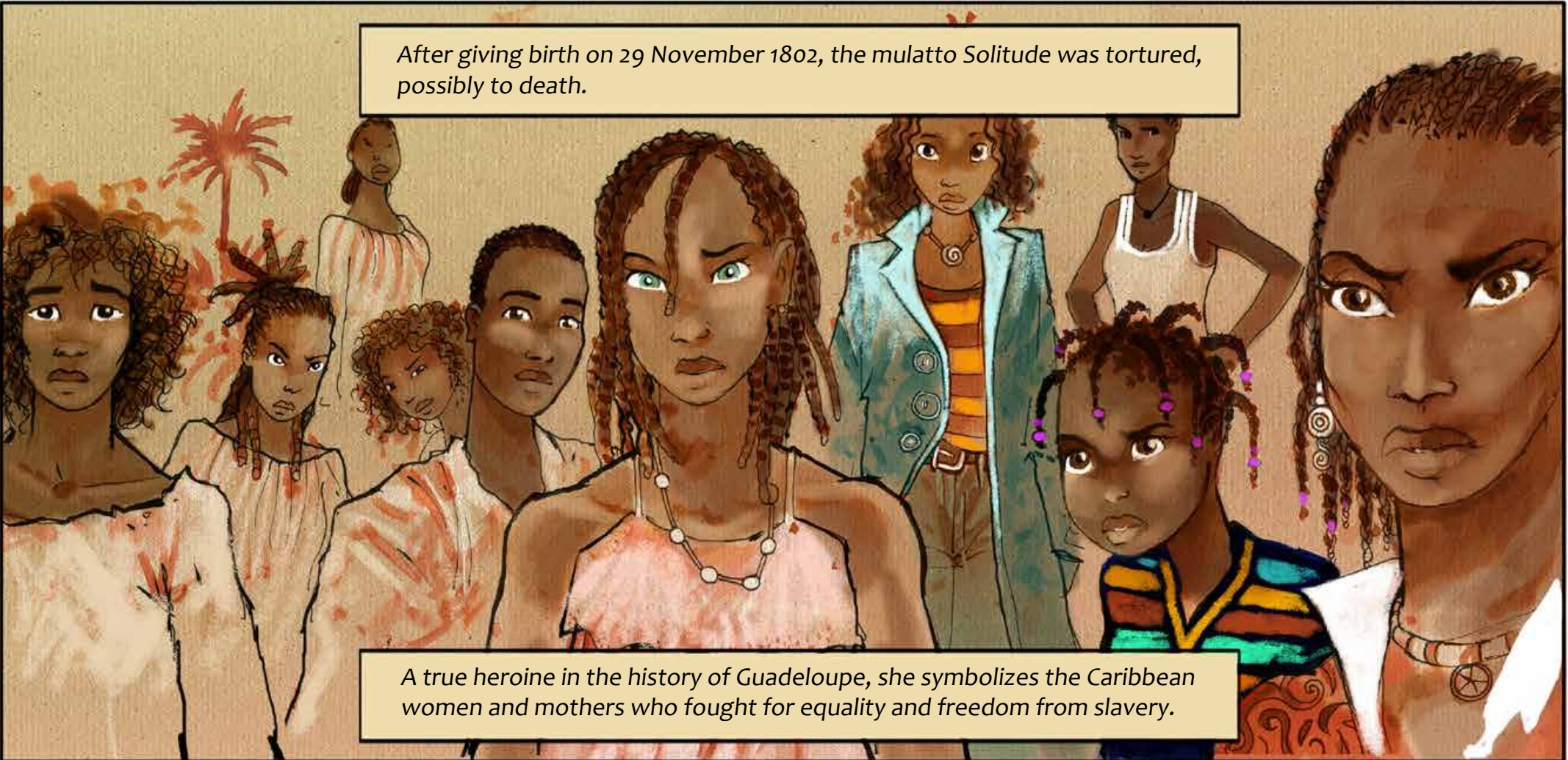


Most of the captured insurgents were executed. Between May and December 1802, more than 3,000 died in battle or were executed. More than 2,000 were deported to France or Venezuela. Solitude, meanwhile, was sentenced to death and imprisoned for several months, until she gave birth.



The new authorities expected her child to become another slave for the plantations.



An illustration featuring a group of Black women and a young girl. The central figure is a woman with long braids and a pink top, looking forward with a serious expression. To her right is a young girl with braids and a colorful striped shirt. On the far right is a close-up of a woman's face with a determined look. Other women are visible in the background, some in traditional Caribbean attire. The background includes a palm tree and a textured, light brown wall.

*After giving birth on 29 November 1802, the mulatto Solitude was tortured, possibly to death.*

*A true heroine in the history of Guadeloupe, she symbolizes the Caribbean women and mothers who fought for equality and freedom from slavery.*

# 4 Pedagogical unit

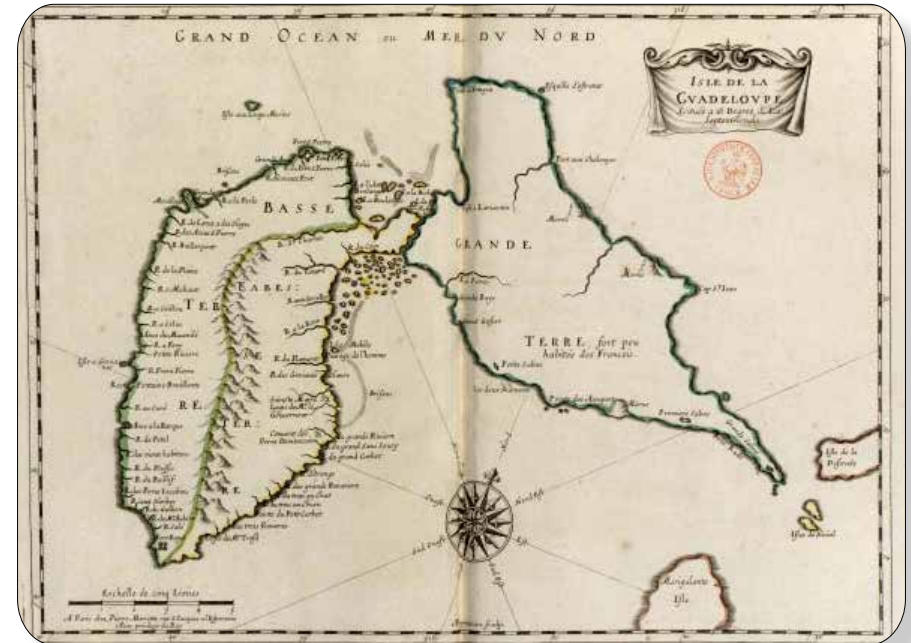
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Map of the Guadeloupe, around 1650.  
Engraving by Abraham Peyrounin,  
edition P. Mariette, Paris, 1750.



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# 1. Historical context: slave society and hope of freedom

## Introduction

The story of the mulatto Solitude took place in Guadeloupe at the end of the eighteenth century. At that time, the society of this Caribbean archipelago was organized entirely around slavery and tropical agriculture (sugar cane, coffee, cotton, etc.).

Between 1789 and 1802, Guadeloupe went through a period of political unrest marked by the spread of the ideals of freedom and equality triggered by the French Revolution. In the space of ten years, Guadeloupe's population experienced, one after the other, slave uprisings, a war against the British, the abolition of slavery and the recapture of Guadeloupe by an army of soldiers of colour (1794), the disbanding of this army (1802) and, finally, the reinstatement of slavery.

The hope that was embodied by revolutionary ideals gave way to the bloody suppression of the uprising of slaves and free people of colour (black and mixed-origin), who had fought for freedom and equality.

### 1.1 French colonization and slave society

The French landed in Guadeloupe in 1635 and fought the island's indigenous Carib population. In 1660, under the treaty of Basse-Terre, the Caribs handed Guadeloupe and Martinique over to the French, but kept Dominica, Saint Vincent, Saint Lucia and Grenada, where French settlers were tolerated. In the eighteenth century, more and more French and British settlers arrived on the islands still in Carib hands.



Map of the Guadeloupe, around 1650.  
Engraving by Abraham Peyrounin,  
edition P. Mariette, Paris, 1750.



Caribbean Man from the Rocoué  
Islands in the West Indies, with  
his arc. Painting by Charles Plumier,  
in *Plantes de la Martinique et  
de la Guadeloupe avec des plans  
et des figures de sauvages de ces  
pays*, 1688.

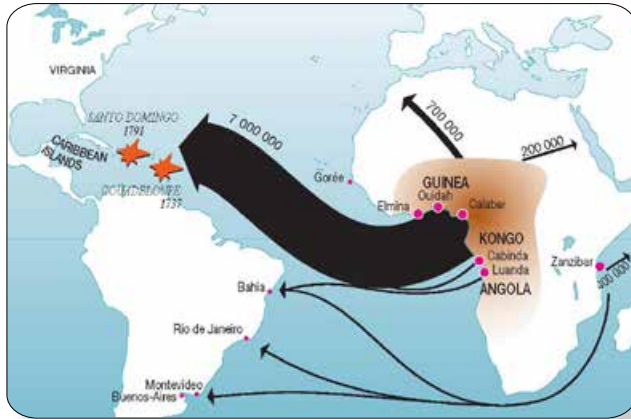
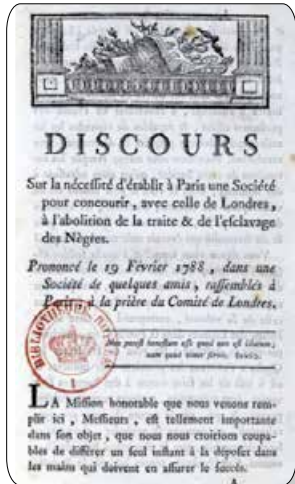


Illustration from The UNESCO Slave Route Project.



Cachet of the Society of the Friends of the Blacks, 1788.

Discourse on the necessity to establish in Paris a company to contribute to the abolition of black slave trade. The Society of the Friends of the Blacks, 1788.

In the space of a few decades, the French established a slave society in order to develop tropical agriculture, in particular sugar cane farming. They relied on the transatlantic slave trade to obtain slave labour for their colony. This society lasted until 27 April 1848, when the provisional government of the Second French Republic signed the decree on the abolition of slavery.

On the eve of the French Revolution, 84 percent of Guadeloupe's population were slaves, whether born in Africa or Guadeloupe (Creoles) (Régent, 2004).

## 1.2 Transatlantic slave trade

The transatlantic slave trade led to the forced migration of more than between 12.5 million and 14 Africans, who were captured, enslaved and sold in the Americas and West Indies between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. It formed the basis of a colonial commerce and maritime trade, led by the Europeans, between Europe, Africa and the Americas, from which a number of French merchants profited considerably.

## 1.3 1789: French Revolution and hope

From 1789, ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity conveyed by the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which proclaimed that 'men are born and remain free and equal in rights', gave hope to free people of colour and slaves in Guadeloupe, and fuelled their demands. Talk of freedom and equality continued to spread and slave-led conspiracies increased in number. In France, the *Société des Amis des Noirs* (Society of the Friends of the Blacks), created in 1788, campaigned for the prohibition of the transatlantic slave trade and the gradual abolition of slavery. It opposed those representing the interests of the main white aristocratic planters (the Massiac Club).

## 1.4 April 1794: the British invasion

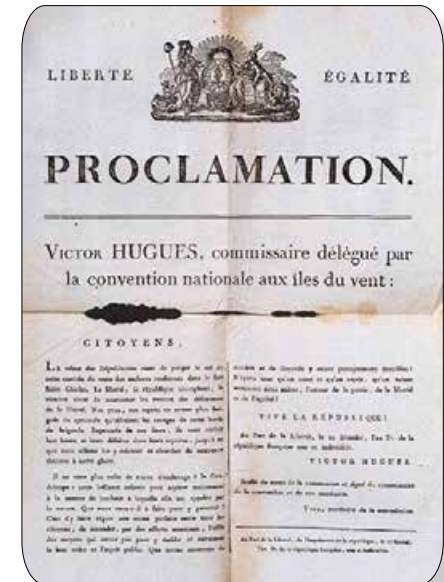
In 1793, the political climate was tense: France declared war on Britain, its colonial rival; meanwhile, tensions were growing in Guadeloupe between republicans and royalists, with the latter prepared to ally themselves with the British. At the beginning of 1794, faced with the threat of a British invasion, Collot, Governor of Guadeloupe, suggested that large numbers of slaves be recruited to the republican army and offered citizenship in return for armed service. Many citizens opposed this decision. On 9 April 1794, the British attacked Guadeloupe with the support of the French royalists. Collot, who had failed to impose his decision to recruit slaves to the republican army, was forced to surrender to the powerful British army.



## 1.5 June 1794: the proclamation of general freedom and terror

Following rebellions by free people of colour and slaves in Saint-Domingue, and in order to meet the Republic's need for soldiers, the French laws of 4 April 1792 and 4 February 1794 granted equality to free people of colour and freedom to slaves, respectively.

On 7 June 1794, Victor Hugues, sent from Paris, proclaimed the abolition of slavery in Guadeloupe. In the space of a few months, thanks to the inclusion of former slaves and free people of colour in the army, he recaptured Guadeloupe from the British. The former slaves showed incredible courage – both the men at the front and the women who looked after the injured during the British bombing of Pointe-à-Pitre. The period of general freedom (1794–1802) was, in reality, a period of forced labour: the former slaves who did not join the army were forced to work on their old plantations.



Proclamation of the abolition of slavery.  
Victor Hugues, 1794.



Bonaparte, First Consul, Jean Auguste  
Dominique Ingres, 1804.

## 1.6 Napoleon takes power

In 1799, in France, Napoleon Bonaparte seized power in a coup d'état. He abolished the regime of equality that had transformed the colonies into French *départements*. However, he favoured the use of soldiers of colour in the war against the British.

At the Council of State meeting on 16 August 1800, the First Consul declared: 'The question is not whether slavery should be abolished [...]. I am convinced that [Saint-Domingue] would be in English hands if the Negroes had not joined us in the interests of their freedom. They may make less sugar, but they will make it for us and they will serve us as soldiers if necessary. If we have one less sugar refinery, we will have one more citadel occupied by friendly soldiers'.

## 1.7 May 1802: freedom or death

In October 1801, Lacrosse, appointed to govern Guadeloupe by Napoleon Bonaparte, wanted to deport a number of officers of colour. However, the officers rebelled and threw Lacrosse out of Guadeloupe.

A provisional government took charge of Guadeloupe, led by Magloire Pélage, a Chief of Brigade from Martinique with a mulatto father and a black mother. Pélage swore allegiance to Bonaparte's France. Even so, in early 1802, Bonaparte sent Richepance and 3,500 men to Guadeloupe to restore Lacrosse to his post and punish the rebels. In May 1802, Pélage prepared to welcome Richepance's troops. When his troops were relieved, the soldiers and officers of colour were taken on board ships. Some went peacefully, while others were humiliated and beaten by Lacrosse's soldiers. Pélage submitted to Richepance's authority. Some officers and soldiers of colour escaped.



## 1.7 May 1802: freedom or death (continued)

Fearing Lacrosse's revenge, Commander Joseph Ignace and Captains Palerme and Massoteau, and the Martinican Commander Louis Delgrès organized a resistance movement against the oppression. On 10 May 1802, Delgrès signed a proclamation entitled 'To the whole universe, the last cry of innocence and despair'. The mulatto Solitude, a few months pregnant, joined the fight.

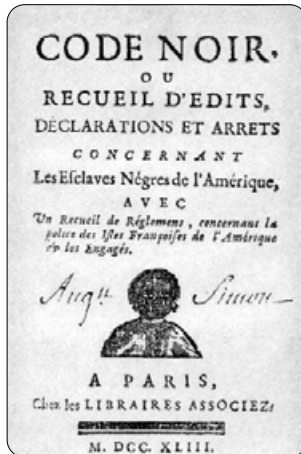
On 26 May 1802, Joseph Ignace lost the battle of Baimbridge and took his own life to avoid being taken prisoner. On 28 May 1802, Delgrès and his troops, composed of soldiers, officers and civilians, including many women, blew up the Danglemont house in Matouba, where they had taken refuge, thus living up to their promise of 'freedom or death'.

Between May and December 1802, more than 3,000 insurgents died in the fighting and the suppression of uprisings.





A mulatto woman.  
Painting by Le Masurier,  
1775.



Black Code signed by  
Louis XIV in 1685. Here,  
reedition from 1743.

## 2. Slavery in Guadeloupe: population and status

### Introduction

For around three centuries, the economy of the French Caribbean colonies was based on a slave system. Social links were forged, hierarchies were created, and a wide variety of relationships between the dominant and the dominated were established.

On the eve of the French Revolution (1789), the population was divided into three legal categories:

- Slaves;
- Free people of colour; and
- Whites.

In addition to these three legal categories, the slave system introduced a complex classification system based on skin colour, the degree of mixing of origins, gender and birthplace.

### 2.1 Legal framework: the Code Noir

The legal framework for slavery was laid down in a series of colonial legal texts known as the Code Noir (Black Code), of which there were several editions and versions. The Code included the decree of March 1685, signed by Louis XIV, establishing the rules on slavery in the French West Indies.

## 2.2 Children, women and men in slavery

In 1789, slaves comprised 84 percent of the Guadeloupian population. Of these, 26 percent had been born in Africa and 74 percent in Guadeloupe (Creoles) (Régent, 2004). Their living conditions were very harsh (injustice, ill treatment, malnutrition, etc.) and the death rate was high.

In legal terms, the decree of March 1685 used the words ‘negro’ and ‘slave’ to describe people in slavery. It also stated that:

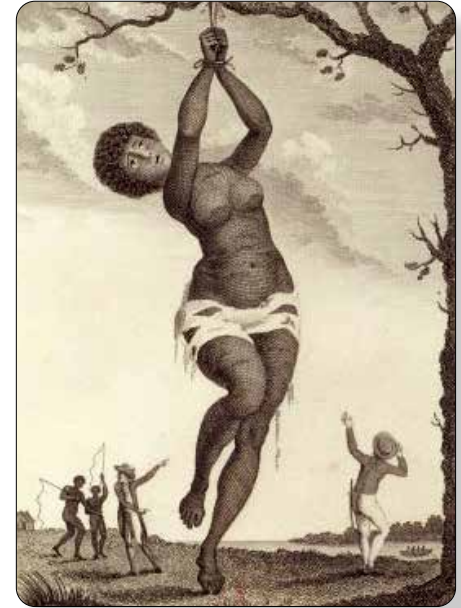
- Slaves were owned;
- They could be sold, seized, given or bequeathed;
- They could not move around without their master’s written permission; and
- Any child whose mother was a slave was also a slave.

Slaves could be freed and become free people of colour. They were ‘movable’ rather than ‘immovable’, which meant that they could not be mortgaged or attached to a piece of land.

## 2.3 Organization of work and hierarchy on a large plantation

On the plantations (the large agricultural estates in the Caribbean), a hierarchical system based on qualification, gender, skin colour and birthplace was used to enable the slave population to govern itself.

‘Field slaves’ were at the bottom of the social ladder and comprised the majority of the slave population. These were black Creoles (born in the colonies) or African slaves who worked in the



Slave Samboé, beaten with a whip.  
Engraving by Tardieu l'ainé and John-Gabriel Stedman, 1798.



Small portable sugar mill.  
Painting by Jean-Baptiste Debret, in Pictorial  
and Historical Travels in Brazil, 1835.

fields, mills or sugar refineries. They were supervised by foremen (black slaves, usually Creole, rarely African), who in turn reported to an overseer (white, free people of colour, rarely slaves). Skilled slaves (blacksmiths, carpenters, masons, etc.) and the masters' domestic servants (cooks, nannies, laundresses, etc.) were better clothed, housed and fed. They existed at the top of the plantation's social ladder.

## 2.4 Free people of colour

Free people of colour represented 3 percent of Guadeloupe's population in 1789 (Régent, 2004). They comprised:

- Freed black or mixed-race slaves;
- Their descendants; and
- In the minority, Amerindians who had lived in Guadeloupe before the arrival of the Europeans.

Free people of colour did not have slave status, but neither did they enjoy the same privileges (tax exemptions, honours, etc.) as people recognized as whites under the law. For example, they were victims of social segregation, were not allowed to take their father's name if he was white, were excluded from certain professions, paid more taxes and were subject to regular checks when relocating.



Dancing scene in the 18<sup>e</sup> century  
(coll. Société d'histoire de la Guadeloupe).

## 2.5 Slaves and free people of colour

In 1789, free people of colour owned 5 percent of all slaves on the island (Régent, 2010), most of whom were women, probably because they were cheaper to buy. Some of these were members of their own family, waiting to be freed. In terms of social relations, free people of colour and slaves were close. They came into contact on the plantations and met at festive events, which were often forbidden, such as rallies, balls or carnivals. Free women, meanwhile, tended to be dressmakers, landowners, confidantes of their former masters, midwives, nurses, market women, and so on.

## 2.6 The whites: in control of slave society

The whites were the dominant group in Guadeloupe's slave society. In 1789, they constituted 13 percent of the population (Régent, 2004). Some were Creoles, others immigrants. The number of slaves that they owned depended on their social class:

- The *grands blancs* (rich and powerful whites) owned the largest sugar plantations. Mostly Creoles, they were at the top of the hierarchy, controlled local institutions (colonial assembly, sovereign council, etc.) and owned an average of around 100 slaves.
- The merchants controlled the island's ports and the importation of slaves and European commodities. Most of them came from metropolitan France and owned around twenty slaves.
- The middle class of whites was made up of government officials, lawyers, small plantation owners (coffee, cotton, etc.) and traders. They each owned around five slaves.
- Finally, there were the *petits blancs* (poor whites): clerks, shopkeepers and manual workers, often from the poor populations of French cities and ports. They owned few or no slaves.



Me free too.  
Engraving by Louis Darcis,  
after a drawing from Louis-Simon Boizot, 1794.



Clément House, Martinique.  
Photograph by Cap21Photo, 2007.

## 3. Women in conflict

### Introduction



Throughout the two and a half centuries of the slave system in Guadeloupe, the slave population tried to escape forced labour and slavery.

The hierarchical system created by the masters, in which the slave population governed itself, made it difficult to rebel. Nevertheless, there were many forms of resistance: slow work, sabotage, mar-ronnage, and so on.

Women were the first to come into contact with the masters. It was especially difficult for them because, under the slave system, they were expected to be more subservient than men, as was particularly reflected in the division of labour between the sexes.

### 3.1 Assembly and survival

The slave population managed to get around the ban on their right to assembly. Associations were formed in Guadeloupe. Initially, slaves were grouped according to their language or the part of Africa from which they had come. Other groups were based on religion. Finally, some clandestine organizations were set up to help slaves escape or to bring an end to the slave society.

In the early nineteenth century, two associations emerged in Guadeloupe: the *Grenats* and the *Violettes*. Their members included slaves, free people of colour and *petits blancs*. They held frequent meetings, for example, every Sunday. Each association, in the districts in which they met, had two different leaders, one male and one female.

These associations were suspected by the *grands blancs* of encouraging slaves and free members to rise up against the whites.

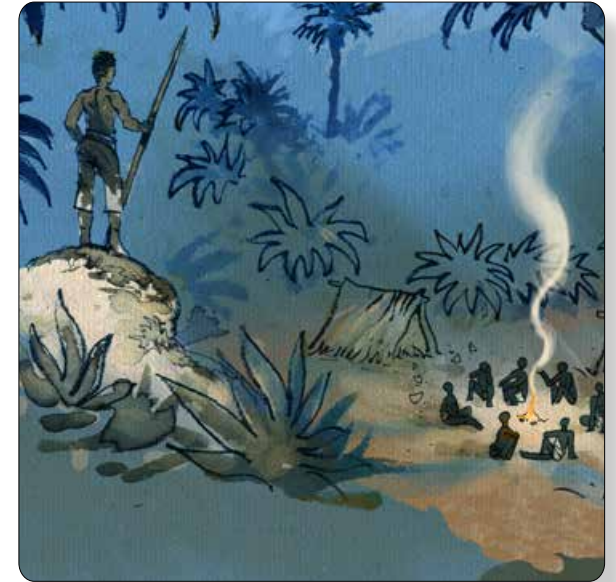
### 3.2 Fleeing slavery: marronnage

Some slaves chose to run away (marronnage) either alone or in small groups. The fugitives were called Maroons or Maroon Negroes, from the Spanish word *cimarron*, meaning someone who runs away from their master. They were brutally treated if caught: some were mutilated, branded or forced to wear iron masks.

Maroons lived secretly:

- In ports or cities;
- On the edges of plantations; and
- In communities, hidden away in areas with little accessibility, such as mountains or forests.

After the insurgents failed to prevent the re-establishment of slavery in 1802, marronnage in the forests and mountainous areas of Guadeloupe grew rapidly.





### 3.3 Marronnage among women

Women ran away for similar reasons to men: to escape ill treatment, to take control of their own lives and, in some cases, to join a loved one, whether a Maroon or a free person of colour.

Many female runaways took refuge in the city suburbs, where they looked for support from the free blacks living there. Others worked illegally near the edges of large plantations. Free blacks that lived in these areas often employed people regardless of their legal status (Gautier, 1985). Some women worked in secret for *petits blancs* who could not afford to buy a slave, while others made a living from prostitution.



### 3.4 Woman and mother: a more difficult condition for marronnage

There were always fewer female Maroons than male (Gautier, 1985), since it was harder for women to escape because:

- They looked after children and may have been pregnant;
- Men often worked outside the plantations (as guards, cart or coach drivers) and therefore had more opportunities to run away than women (dressmakers, maidservants, laundresses, etc.); and
- Once they had escaped, men's qualifications made it easier for them at that time to find clandestine employment in ports or cities.



The fact that fewer women escaped than men was therefore not a result of better treatment of women on the plantations, but linked to their condition as women and mothers, which restricted their mobility and their ability to support themselves (Gautier, 1985).

### 3.5 Slave rebellions

With weapons and tools available, slaves in Guadeloupe rebelled several times in their history (1656, 1738, 1793). However, slave uprisings were severely punished, almost always leading to imprisonment, torture or death.

Although the number of rebellions was small, conspiracies were more common. Paradoxically, slave-led conspiracies were often reported to the authorities by slaves themselves, as masters would reward them for their loyalty, for example, by freeing them. Indeed, some slaves helped to control the agricultural work force, which is undoubtedly one of the reasons why the system survived for more than two centuries in Guadeloupe (Régent, 2004).





### 3.6 Women in combat

Women took part in the fighting from the start of the 1802 insurrection. They had many key roles including: preparing weapons; looking after, comforting and transporting the injured under enemy fire; and carrying messages between troops at the risk of their own capture and injury.

They also galvanized the troops with songs and dances, punctuated with cries of ‘Long live death!’



## 4. The Mulatto Solitude: story and symbols

### Introduction

The only historical reference to the mulatto Solitude is found in a few lines of the book, *Histoire de la Guadeloupe* (History of Guadeloupe), written by Auguste Lacour (1805–1869). Nevertheless, Solitude symbolizes in Caribbean collective imagination all the unknown women and mothers who courageously fought for equality and freedom from slavery. Unfortunately, very few of the women who took part in these struggles are remembered in the history books. Solitude and a few others, such as Sanite Belair and Marie-Jeanne Lamartinière in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), and Marthe-Rose, known as Toto, in Guadeloupe, are the exceptions.

### 4.1 The book by Auguste Lacour

*Histoire de la Guadeloupe* by Auguste Lacour contains the only nineteenth-century reference to the mulatto Solitude. This book was based on research into the administrative archives, chronicles of the time and witness accounts of the 1802 insurrection against the reinstatement of slavery.

Lacour tells us little about Solitude, recording that she was sentenced to death and tortured (possibly to death) a day after giving birth: ‘Finally arrested in the middle of a band of insurgents, she was sentenced to death; but was granted a delay for her execution date. She was *suppliciée* \* on 29 November, after giving birth’ (p. 311).

\* To be “*suppliciée*” means to be tortured, which could include flogging or being shackled, and could culminate in death.



## 4.2 The novel by André Schwarz-Bart

In 1972, the French writer André Schwarz-Bart published a novel based on the historical context of the era and the little that was known about Solitude.

The novel, *La Mulâtresse Solitude*, tells the story of Bayangumay, a stubborn, cheerful young African girl, who is captured and deported to Guadeloupe. She gives birth to a mulatto, Rosalie, after being raped on the ship that took her to the West Indies. The story then describes the life of Solitude (Rosalie's new name) until she is executed the day after giving birth.

The story told in Schwarz-Bart's novel enjoyed a certain amount of success, but it is not considered historically accurate.

## 4.3 Historical figure in the events of May 1802

Since 1999 and following the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery (1848), the story of Joseph Ignace, Louis Delgrès, the mulatto Solitude and their fellow rebels (Palerme, Massoteau, Codou, Jacquet, etc.) has spread and been transmitted to new generations.

In 1999, the municipality of Abymes in Guadeloupe inaugurated a statue of the mulatto Solitude.

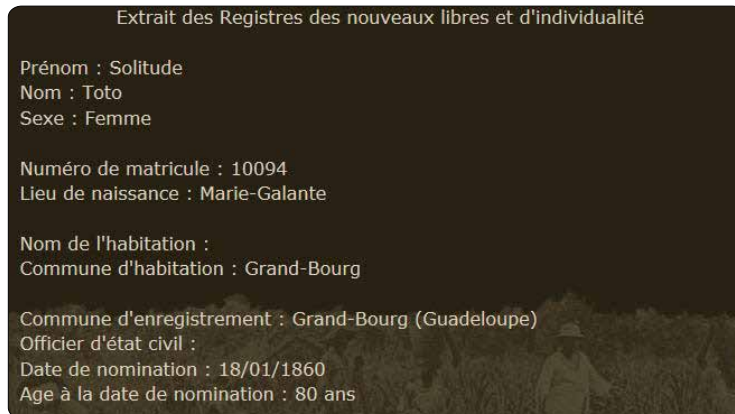
In 2007, the town of Bagnaux, in the Paris area, erected another monument to her memory and in 'homage to and recognition of the victims and opponents of the slave trade and slavery'.



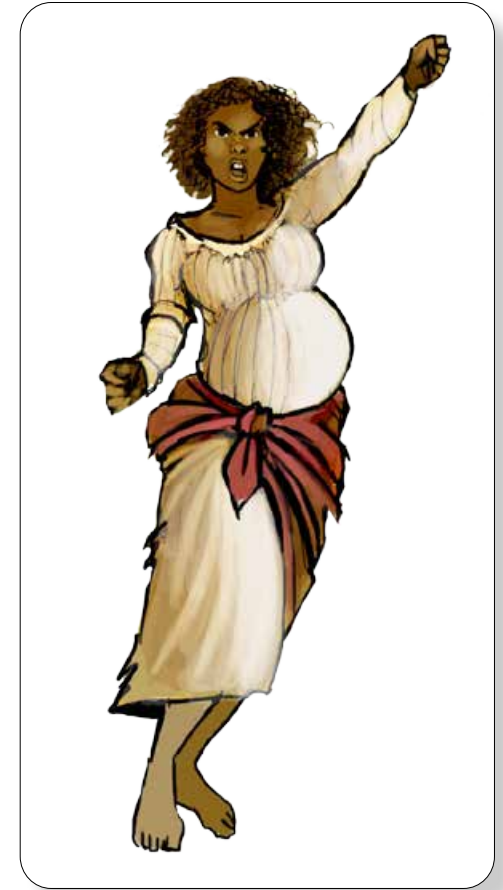
## 4.4 A story yet to be written: some hypotheses

According to André Schwarz-Bart's novel *La Mulâtresse Solitude* (1972), Solitude was hanged. This is not confirmed by any historical source. Furthermore, the French term *suppliciée* does not necessarily imply the death penalty.

It was common for the death penalty to be reduced to other lesser forms of punishments, such as forced labour. It should also be noted that a woman named Solitude was mentioned in a register of newly freed slaves in Guadeloupe in 1860. She was 80 years old and was given the patronymic name 'Toto'. The evidence suggests that this Solitude could have been the mulatto of 1802, since the age seems to match; however, her patronym is a little confusing, since it corresponds to that of another female figure from 1802. Toto was also the nickname of Marthe Rose, known as Toto, the companion of Delgrès. Marthe Rose, known as Toto, may even have been Solitude's sister.



Extract of the register « des nouveaux libres et d'individualité. »





All men are equal; it is not their birth, but virtue itself that makes the difference, etching, Carl de Vinck, 1794.

# 5 Resources

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Schwarz-Bart, A. 1972. *La Mulâtresse Solitude* [The Mulatto Solitude]. Paris, Le Seuil.

# 5 Resources

## Web links



Website about the 1802 rebellion:  
[www.lameca.org/dossiers/1802/](http://www.lameca.org/dossiers/1802/)



Virtual resources on slavery (CNRS):  
[www.esclavages.cnrs.fr/](http://www.esclavages.cnrs.fr/)



Lacour Auguste, *Histoire de la Guadeloupe*, Tome 3, Basse terre 1858, digitized version:  
<http://books.google.fr/books?id=e817AAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>





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### **The Mulatto Solitude**

In May 1802, while a few months pregnant, the Mulatto Solitude took part in the Guadeloupien uprisings against the reinstatement of Lacroix, who had been appointed Captain-General of Guadeloupe by Napoleon Bonaparte and expelled in October 1801 following a coup by the army's officers of colour. After her arrest, Solitude was imprisoned and subsequently tortured, possibly to death, a day after giving birth. Solitude symbolizes all Caribbean women and mothers who fought for equality and freedom from slavery.

### **Women in African History**

By way of various artistic and pedagogical resources available online, this UNESCO project highlights a selection of historical female figures, from Africa and of African descent, who have distinguished themselves in the history of the continent in areas as diverse as politics (Gisèle Rabesahala), diplomacy and resistance against colonization (Njinga Mbandi), defence of women's rights (Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti) and environmental protection (Wangari Maathai).

The selection of women figures proposed in the framework of this project is not exhaustive and represents only a small part of the contribution of African women, known and unknown, to the history of their countries, Africa and all mankind.

**For additional pedagogical resources, please visit the web site [www.unesco.org/womenin africa](http://www.unesco.org/womenin africa)**

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