

**Notes from the Editor:**  
**Endings to Slavery**  
Pamela McCallum

On 24 March 1807 the British Parliament voted to end the Atlantic slave trade. Almost a century earlier the Treaty of Utrecht had given England control over the Atlantic slave trade, a concession that allowed Britain to amass enormous wealth still visible in lavish buildings and inscribed in the names of city streets. The decision to abolish the slave trade was undoubtedly a crucial moment when a society turned away from a profitable business to advocate larger humanitarian values. As the African-Scottish writer Jackie Kay comments, “the movement to end slavery in the British Empire in the 18th century is probably the first human rights campaign in history.”

At the same time, it is imperative to recall that the Abolitionist movement around William Wilberforce, or the politics of William Pitt, occupy only a small place in the collective energies of human agency directed against ending slavery. Throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, in the English colonies and elsewhere, slaves rebelled against their masters, sometimes dying in the attempt, sometimes running away to form maroon communities deep in the interior of the islands. As examples of successful escapes from slavery, maroon communities were alternative spaces of life and imagination that, in the words of the American historian Eugene Genovese, “had a destructive impact on slavery and provided a spur to slave disaffection, desertion, and rebellion. In Surinam, Venezuela, Jamaica, and elsewhere, maroons inspired slaves to challenge white authority and to rebel” (55–56). The movement to end slavery begins with slaves themselves, who, in myriad ways, resisted and rose up against the inhuman conditions of their lives.

From another perspective, it is also necessary to note that slavery itself had been abolished in the Caribbean before 1807: in the French colonies with a dramatic, often forgotten, declaration by the

Paris Convention under the Jacobin government on 4 February 1794. Following the successful rebellion in San Domingue (now Haiti) under Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Paris deputies voted for the following decree: "The National Convention declares slavery abolished in all the colonies. In consequence it declares that all men, without distinction of colour, domiciled in the colonies, are French citizens, and enjoy all the rights assured under the Constitution" (qtd. in James 141). As the classic account in C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins* insists, the abolition of slavery was not simply an act of legislators, but was the result of the revolt in San Domingue and "a reflection of the overflowing desire which filled all France to end tyranny and oppression everywhere" (141). Sadly, but not surprisingly, this moment of freedom did not last long: slavery was reinstated in the French Caribbean colonies under the Napoleonic empire.

Why is it important to remember these details of a history long past? Why is it necessary to keep in mind when we mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave *trade* that slavery itself was not abolished in the English Caribbean colonies until 1838? Kay points out the existential and material effects for the slave population: "Imagine the frustration of being an enslaved African in 1807, knowing the trade was supposed to have stopped because people in Britain had decided it was evil, and still being subjected to endless beatings and whippings, and still not getting a sniff of free air for another 31 years." This number, seemingly insignificant in broad historical terms—only 31 years—represents more than a generation of infants born into slavery, more than half the lives of many adults, years and years of further suffering before slavery itself ended. Kay stresses the need to remember the silences around slavery and the slave trade: this lost generation who existed in slavery when the trade was abolished, the utter absence of those who died in the Middle Passage, the unwillingness to connect the wealth of eighteenth-century Britain with slavery and the slave trade.

And yet, it is also critical to remember the formal abolition of the slave trade in March 2007. As Kay has noted, it challenges us to recall a popular movement for basic human rights. By extension, it also reminds us that different forms of slavery—indentured labour, human trafficking

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for the sex trade, household workers in many countries—have persisted into the twenty-first century. *ARIEL* is pleased to publish this special number on “Anglo-Caribbean Slavery” and is grateful for the work of the co-editors, Sara Salih and Candace Ward, and the research of the contributors on this historically significant and still urgent subject.

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