March 1762. In the southwest corner of Saint-Domingue, a son was born to Alexandre Antoine Davy de la Pailleterie, a Norman aristocrat, and Marie Césette Dumas, a woman of color and most probably his slave. This son, Thomas Alexandre, would become one of the leading generals of the French Republic, a rival of Napoleon’s, and the father of Alexandre Dumas, “the most famous French writer of the nineteenth century” (p. 1). January 1781, almost twenty years after Thomas Alexandre’s birth, another Dumas of color, Marie Françoise Elisabeth, having married a colonist from Normandy, Jean Valentin Vastey, gave birth to a son, Jean Louis, in the northern province of the colony. In the decade and a half following the declaration of Haitian independence in 1804, Elisabeth’s light-skinned son, better known as the Baron de Vastey, would become a leading figure in the government of King Henry Christophe (1807-20), the first native-born historian of Haiti and a tireless publicist in a transatlantic media campaign to unmask the neocolonial ambitions of the French, who throughout this period were hell-bent on recovering their precious “pearl of the Antilles” from the black Jacobins who had wrested it from them in the name of universal emancipation.

Since their deaths, Dumas and Vastey—who have been traditionally (if, it would now appear on the basis of the latest genealogical research, erroneously) identified as first cousins—have both suffered varying degrees of erasure from the historical record. However, as is amply demonstrated in Eric Martone’s final chapter, Dumas has, in recent years, gained a definitive place in the pantheon of French history, in large part through the vocal efforts of the prolific Franco-Guadeloupean historian and novelist Claude Ribbe, founder in 2006 of the Association des amis du général Dumas. Dumas has been transformed into a veritable lieu de mémoire through whom the memory of slavery and republican universalism can be thought in France. This process of consecration culminated in the April 2009 unveiling of a monument in the general’s honor, financed by the city of Paris and situated in the Place du général Catroux, which also houses statues of his son and grandson. The monument, a massive pair of shackles, replaced a statue of the general that had been installed there on the eve of World War I,
but was torn down three decades later by collaborators in Nazi-occupied France because of his Afro-Caribbean origins. The new visibility of “General Humanity” in France fuels Martone’s buoyant optimism regarding the power of civil society to create a public space “to contest French identity that has forced the state into negotiations that have limited its authority” (p. 220). For Martone, Dumas’s commemoration is heartening evidence that contemporary France has become a place in which national histories are “no longer determined exclusively by the dominant social group (i.e. ‘winners’), but instead are negotiated processes with influential groups and/or individuals that reflect a global sensibility” (p. 210).

Martone’s account of the events leading up to the Caribbean-born general’s 2009 commemoration is assuredly the chapter of most relevance to NWIG readers. This book—which markets itself as “the first scholarly work to bring Dumas into the center of debates about French identity and France’s relations with its former colonies” (p. 8)—also features a useful introduction, in which Martone provides a tripartite overview of the varying ways in which the black Atlantic identity of the general’s French-born son has been represented (or not, as the case may be) over the past century and a half leading up to his 2002 interment in the Pantheon. Martone first examines the changing representations of Dumas’s “racial” identity: during his lifetime, for instance, verbal and visual representations accentuated Dumas’s “black” features, whereas by the end of the nineteenth century “it became the norm to accentuate his Caucasian features” (p. 6). He then shows how, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, a foundation was laid for the construction of Dumas as a “francophone writer” in various prefaces to his 1843 novel Georges, the only work in which Dumas explicitly addresses colonialism and slavery. Finally, he details the Anglophone (and more specifically, American) reception of Georges, from the multiple translations of the novel that were published in the nineteenth century up to the 2007 Modern Library translation, which featured a foreword by Jamaica Kincaid that, notwithstanding the novel’s Indian Ocean setting, “expressed a sense of Caribbean solidarity with Dumas and his novel” (p. 19).

In re-situating the novelist Dumas and his entire family circle within the “francophone world,” Martone’s contributions support the book’s back-cover claim that academic scholarship “has begun to catch up with Dumas.” However, the six essays that are sandwiched between his introduction and his concluding chapter on General Dumas suggest that the most popular
French writer of the nineteenth century remains well in advance of his critics. These essays include: an astonishingly bloated psychoanalytic account of Dumas’s variously conflicted representations of his father, two plot-dependent accounts of Georges, a productive “Franco-Indic” reading of The Count of Monte Cristo, a suggestive investigation of the development of the “literary myth” of The Three Musketeers and its recent appropriation as a national lieu de mémoire, and an intertextual analysis of the role of Dumas in Dai Sijie’s Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress.

Rather than explore these poorly proofread essays in detail, it is more important to address the question of whether “francophonizing” the Dumas is an effective way of catching up with them. So often, as here, the contestation of “French identity” that is a central goal, and supposed achievement, of the Francophone agenda ends up working in tandem with, rather than against the grain of, a francocentric logic that inexorably draws author, critic, and reader back toward the very thing from which one might naturally have expected the critical gesture of “reevaluation” to be distancing us: namely, (a redemptive vision of) the French nation, its values, and its language. Characteristic of, and perhaps even endemic to, the seemingly expansive field of Francophone studies, this centripetal logic is all the more glaringly evident in the case of Martone’s effort at reading Dumas as a “representative of la Francophonie” (p. 8), because in this particular case any such effort has to take into account, and to no small extent valorize, the similarly recuperative efforts that have recently been undertaken by the French government in official commemorative acts such as the pantheonization of Dumas or the (re)monumentalization of his father. Faced with such similarities, the self-protective impulse of the Francophonizing critic is to engage in a form of disavowal, by representing such acts of commemoration in unabashedly positive terms as evidence of civil society’s power to set limits on state authority, rather than confront the unsettling possibility that, in a globalizing age of transnational pluralism and multiculturalism, these acts (and the negotiations that make them possible) are precisely what is required by the neoliberal state, no less than by the “influential groups and/or individuals” who constitute civil society, in order to breathe new life into the perduring myth of la France éternelle.

Notwithstanding its symptomatic relation to the central(izing) problematic of the ostensibly decentralizing field of Francophone studies, The Black Musketeer has the undeniable virtue of demonstrating the need for
future literary and cultural critics interested in the Dumas to confront the past and present efforts of the state and civil society (to say nothing of the market) at commemorating them, and to deal with the pressing question of how, or whether, one can disentangle the “good” memories from the “bad.” Two examples may be reported here as fresh evidence that there will be no end of commemorative material for those critics to work through.

In September 2011, Claude Ribbe addressed a questionnaire to Nicolas Sarkozy, as well as to all the declared candidates for the upcoming presidential election, asking: “How do you envisage rendering homage to General Dumas in 2012, as part of the 250th anniversary of his birth?”1 In November 2011, the website of the Société des amis d’Alexandre Dumas noted that to mark the sestercentennial anniversary of the birth of the writer’s father “in the former French colony of Saint-Domingue, present-day Haiti,” a group of French and Haitian admirers based in Haiti were organizing “an excursion and a memorial ceremony” to his place of birth and “were inviting Dumasians of France and elsewhere to join them.”2 The difference in stature between these two examples—the first a direct challenge to the French president made by an influential member of civil society, the second an invitation to participate in memorial tourism—could not be more apparent. And yet, precisely because they are disparate manifestations of the same commemorative impulse, future critics must draw a line, be it of connection or distinction, between them. Are they both praiseworthy manifestations of “good” revisionist memory? Or is Ribbe’s intervention an admirable gesture that paves the way, as Martone claims, for further positive negotiations that reflect a “global sensibility,” and the planned excursion to Haiti a not merely trivial but noxious form of memorial tribute?3 Or are they both “bad” memories promoting an insidious Francocentrism that has changed very little since its neocolonial logic was first unmasked by that “other” Dumas, Baron de Vastey, some two hundred years ago, as part

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1 http://www claude-ribbe com. All web references were last consulted on 19 December 2011.
2 http://www dumaspere com/pages/actualites/actualite.html.
3 In a blog chronicling his month-long journey to Haiti on the trail of the Dumas, the excursion organizer, a certain Noël Lebaupin, revealingly lamented that “the legend of the general (a product of the Ancien Régime) was eclipsed by the history of the Haitian Revolution, a glorious history albeit one that is still a little too glorified today” (http://www dumaspere com/pages/vie/lieux/haiti.html; my italics).
of the (still ongoing) anticolonial struggle to preserve Haiti and its revolutionary promise of universal emancipation from “the despotic yoke that once oppressed us” (Vastey 2014). However one chooses to draw this line, it is certain that this last response, polemical as it must appear in our own age of “post-ideological” consensus, is the one with the most potential to disrupt the hegemonic process whereby “francophone” exceptions are appropriated and “normalized” by politicians, intellectuals, and marketers, in the name of a greater, more globally sensitive France. Effectively catching up with the Dumas, I would suggest, will entail, at the very least, remembering to take this anticolonial response into account, rather than (as in The Black Musketeer) simply excluding it from the range of critical possibilities.

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Reference