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