In one sense, this book of selections from first-person narratives of the Haitian insurrection of 1791–1804 grew out of an accidental encounter. As I was driving home one day in 1995, I happened to hear a review of a novel about the insurrection on National Public Radio’s All Things Considered. The novel was Madison Smartt Bell’s All Souls’ Rising, the first in what turned out to be a trilogy on the subject,¹ and Allan Cheuse’s praise for it was sufficiently convincing to persuade me to purchase it when I saw it on display at my local bookstore. As a specialist in the history of the French Revolution, I knew that there had been a slave uprising in France’s Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue in 1791, but, like most scholars in my field, I had never paid much attention to the subject. I knew very little about Haiti or the Caribbean, and none of my previous work had had anything to do with race or slavery. I found Bell’s novel compelling reading; it made me want to learn more about the events he described. As a historian, I wondered how Bell had been able to imagine the details of his characters’ lives so convincingly. In 2001, when I was directing a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar at the Newberry Library in Chicago, I discovered part of the answer. Exploring the library’s famous Ayer Collection on Caribbean history, I read the first-person narratives by the colonists Gros and Descourtilz included in this volume and realized that many of the adventures of Bell’s protagonist, the white doctor Hébert, were based on incidents in their accounts. Had I read All Souls’ Rising carefully enough, in fact, I would have noticed that Gros puts in a cameo appearance, as does Descourtilz in a later volume of Bell’s trilogy.
In order to imagine the inner experience of his characters, Madison Smartt Bell availed himself of the creative writer’s privilege to go beyond the documentary record. In particular, through the creation of a black counterpart to Dr. Hébert, the former slave Riau, he takes his readers into a world from which we have no written testimonies: that of the black population, with its cult of vodou and its very different experience of the revolutionary era. Bell’s trilogy—All Souls’ Rising has since been followed by Master of the Crossroads and The Stone That the Builder Refused, which follow Dr. Hébert, Riau, the black leader Toussaint Louverture, and many other characters through the thirteen years from the beginning of the slave revolt in 1791 to the independence of Haiti in 1804—is a remarkable achievement that has introduced many readers to the epic story of the Haitian Revolution. My discovery of the Gros and Descourtilz memoirs, as vivid in their own ways as Bell’s novels, led me to wonder how many other eyewitnesses to these events had recorded their own experiences and what their accounts might have to tell us about this history.

My developing interest in the first-person narratives of the Haitian insurrection happened to fit with my own scholarly agenda. Although the first half of my career had been devoted to a standard historical subject—the role of the press in the era of the French Revolution—in the early 1990s I had developed a more idiosyncratic interest in the study of autobiographical writing and in the relations of first-person narrative to historical scholarship. This eventually culminated in the publication of a book, History, Historians, and Autobiography,² that analyzed the distinctive qualities of first-person historical testimony and the first-person writings of professional historians. It has been quite a leap from studying autobiographical narratives by twentieth-century college professors to dissecting those of eighteenth-century slaveowners, but some of the lessons I learned from the former have been useful in interpreting the latter. Another influence on this project has come from the courses I teach on the Holocaust. First-person accounts are of fundamental importance in trying to comprehend that event, and, although there are great differences between Holocaust survivor literature and the narratives of the Haitian insurrection, thinking comparatively about these two bodies of witness testimony has had considerable impact on my understanding of the texts presented here. Finally, I must mention the influence of my father, the late Richard H. Popkin. In his 1973 article “The Philosophical Basis of Modern Racism,” he was one of the first scholars to raise the issue of the Enlightenment’s contribution to racial stereotypes.³ A portrait of the abbé Henri Grégoire, the French Revolution’s leading advocate of racial equality, hung over his desk, and the conference on Grégoire that he invited
me to organize with him at UCLA’s Clark Library in 1997 helped deepen my awareness of the importance of that issue.\textsuperscript{4}

Although I came to the study of the first-person narratives from the Haitian insurrection by my own peculiar route, it is also clear that I was also unconsciously following the zeitgeist. As we move into the twenty-first century, we are becoming ever more conscious of how much of the unhappy legacy of Atlantic slavery is still with us. My generation of American scholars grew up during the civil rights movement of the early 1960s, and the fact that neither the heroism of the protesters of that period, nor the eloquence of Martin Luther King, nor the civil rights laws passed in those years have succeeded in bringing us to the promised land of full racial harmony has been an abiding disappointment and a stimulus to a tremendous amount of scholarship about the history of race relations. In our present era of globalization, there is an increasing awareness that the story of race and slavery in the United States is just part of a larger history, one in which the insurrection in Haiti—the only successful slave uprising in the long history of the Atlantic world—is a crucial episode. The fact that many of the first-person narratives included in this volume were written and published in the United States, by refugees from the uprising who wanted to warn American readers of the peril they faced, demonstrates the intimate connections between the Caribbean and the United States. The encouragement that I have received from colleagues working on the history of race and slavery in America shows that this subject is important, not just because it fit so well with my own eclectic combination of interests, but because it speaks to widely shared concerns. In France as well, there is a growing recognition that present-day dilemmas about race and the legacy of empire require a better understanding of the revolutionary era’s confrontation with these issues.

As I have worked on this project, I have benefited from the advice, criticism, and bibliographic suggestions of innumerable friends and colleagues. Madison Smartt Bell responded generously to my first communications and has continued to encourage me in my pursuit of these obscure first-person accounts. Laurent Dubois has generously shared his expertise about the period and offered many helpful comments about my work. I am also indebted to William Andrews, Elizabeth Colwill, Daniel Desormeaux, Marcel Dorigny, John Erickson, Carolyn Fick, Norman Fiering, John Garrigus, David Geggus, Carol Gluck, Joanne Melish, Philip Morgan, Pierre Saint-Amand, Alyssa Sepinwall, Aletha Stahl, and Roxanne Wheeler for valuable advice and encouragement. The members of my two National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminars on “Revolution and Changing Identities” at the Newberry Library in 2001 and 2006 provided stimulating reactions to my
ideas at the beginning and the end of this project, respectively, and I benefited from exchanges with audiences at the Modern Language Association’s 2002 meeting, the eighteenth-century studies groups of the Université de Lyon-II and the University of Leeds, the John Carter Brown Library seminar, the George Mason University History Department, the early modern European seminar at the Institute for Advanced Study, directed by Jonathan Israel, the 2006 “Modern Ethnic Studies in Europe and America” conference, the seminar of Myriam Cottias and Jean Hébrard at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris), and the seminar of Jean-Clément Martin at the Institut de l’Histoire de la Révolution française (Université de Paris-I). By inviting me to participate in the conference they organized at the John Carter Brown Library on the occasion of the bicentennial of the Haitian Revolution in 2004, Norman Fiering and David Geggus gave me an unparalleled opportunity to meet the community of scholars concerned with that topic, most notably Yves Bénot, whose untimely death a year later was a sad loss to the field. This project would also not have developed as it did had I not had the opportunity to exchange ideas with so many of the leading scholars in the growing field of autobiography and life-writing studies—in particular Paul John Eakin and Philippe Lejeune.

The research leading to this book began at the Newberry Library in Chicago, whose staff has assisted me generously throughout my scholarly career. As my work developed, I also profited from the assistance of librarians and archivists at the John Carter Brown Library, the Bancroft Library, the Historic New Orleans Collection, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Archives nationales, the Centre d’Archives d’Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence, the Hagley Library, the Library of Congress, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Library Company of Philadelphia, the Firestone Library at Princeton University, the New York Public Library, the New-York Historical Society, and the University of Kentucky Library. Fellowships from the Institute for Advanced Study, where I was the Hans Kohn Member in the spring of 2006, and from the University of Kentucky Research Foundation and a semester as the visiting Charles Watts II Professor at Brown University in 2005 helped make the necessary research possible. I am grateful to Duncan Parham of New Orleans for permission to republish sections of the remarkable narrative originally translated and edited by his mother, Althéa de Puech Parham, under the title *My Odyssey* and for permission to consult the original French manuscript of that work, now in the Historic New Orleans Collection. I am also grateful to the journal *Eighteenth Century Studies* for permission to reproduce some material that appeared in my “Facing Racial Revolution: Captivity Narratives of the Saint Domingue Uprising”
Douglas Mitchell of the University of Chicago Press has been an eminently supportive editor, unfazed by his author’s drastic shift of subject field.

In the spring of 2005, while I was in the midst of this project, my family suffered the loss of both my father, Richard Popkin, and my sister, Margaret Popkin. My father, as I have already mentioned, preceded me by many years in recognizing the importance of the problem of race in the era of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. My sister devoted her adult life to the cause of human rights in the Americas. She was deeply involved in the truth-and-reconciliation processes in several Central American countries, particularly El Salvador and Guatemala, and, through her work as the director of the Due Process of Law Foundation, in efforts to establish fair and dependable legal systems in the region. As I write this, I have in front of me the copy she gave me of the Gid Sitwayen (The citizen’s guide), published by the National Democratic Institute in 2004 in Port-au-Prince, a booklet produced in the hope of helping Haiti’s people realize the promise of the revolution recorded in the documents brought together in this volume. Facing Racial Revolution is dedicated to my father and my sister, out of love and admiration for the contributions they both made to the struggle against prejudice and injustice.