

Dear Colleagues,

I am thrilled to have the opportunity to share this chapter-in-progress with all of you. It comes from my book manuscript, tentatively titled *Bourbon Island Creoles: Race and Revolution in the French Indian Ocean World*. The book makes the case for considering France's understudied Indian Ocean colonies of Réunion, Mauritius, Seychelles, and coastal enclaves in India and Madagascar, in broader historiographical conversations about slavery and race in the Age of Revolutions. As a global history, it looks comparatively at French (and other empires') colonial experience in North America, Africa, and the Indian Ocean world. I welcome any and all suggestions on this piece. I am particularly interested in analogous cases from North American contexts. Thanks so much for taking the time to read it. I look forward to our discussion.

-Nathan Marvin

## Bourbon Island Creoles and the Construction of Whiteness in France's Global Empire

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In 1778 the royal administrators of Bourbon Island (today, La Réunion), a French slave colony in the Southwest Indian Ocean, responded to a letter that caught them by surprise. As part of a raft of new legislation emanating from the French government in Versailles aiming to standardize, entrench, and police the boundary between white and nonwhite in its colonies, new instructions ordered clergy to indicate the “degree of color” of all individuals named in parish records. For one local priest, Father Antoine Davelu, who had arrived on the island two years earlier, the new rules were at odds with local conventions for assigning whiteness. Davelu wondered about how best to apply the new instructions in light of the fact that many of his white parishioners, and indeed the majority of Creole (island-born) whites<sup>1</sup> in the colony, were of mixed European and non-European descent. Using parish records to establish the genealogies of free members of his flock, would he now be obliged to confirm whites as “white” (in other words, with no racial marker next to their names) and essentially reclassify all others as “colored”?

This prospect horrified the colony's administrators. In their response to Davelu, they disclosed how *they* interpreted Versailles's instructions, and in so doing, put to paper for the first time the protocol that they and their predecessors had followed for decades but never revealed in their official correspondence with their superiors in the metropole. Rather than apply the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this chapter, I employ the standard English translation of French racial terms as they were used in eighteenth-century Bourbon Island (La Réunion). These categories include “whites” (*les Blancs*), which encompassed all immigrants from Europe as well as free persons born in the islands accepted by social consensus as such (a majority of whom was of mixed European and non-European ancestry); Creoles (*les créols* or *créoles*), which glossed all people born in the colony/ies, irrespective of race or status; and “blacks” (*les Noirs*), which denoted slaves of all origins. Perhaps because those origins were so diverse (Madagascar, mainland Africa, and South and Southeast Asia), the term *négre*, which was popular in France's American and African holdings, was rarely used in the French Indian Ocean world (although the feminine form, *négresse*, was). The expression most often written by European observers as “Bourbon Island Creoles (*les Créoles de l'isle de Bourbon*)” was eighteenth-century shorthand for those island-born free people accepted as white (rather than of color).

exclusionary standards that were gaining currency in the empire, the king's decrees should be adapted to match the local sensibilities of Bourbon Island.

They urged Davelu not to ruffle any feathers by upending a status quo that, after all, benefitted the vast majority of those designated white on the island. Although the administrators conceded that many Creole whites did indeed “have some degrees of color,” prudence required that all record-keepers for the Crown overlook that fact:

It is out of the question to ask Creoles, who, having had some mixture [i.e. mixed unions] among their ancestors, would have some degrees of color, [to provide] their genealogy and to require of them a direct line of descent (*une filiation*) going back to their establishment in this Colony. We are very surprised that you could have thought to do such a thing without thinking first of the Scandal that would result. Moreover, the author of these instructions never intended his words to be understood that way, as common sense would suggest.<sup>2</sup>

The implication of the administrators' closing statement was that the highest authorities in the empire, the king and his ministers, would favor maintaining local custom, and thus social stability, rather than strict adherence to their own laws. At this time, French racial policy was articulating a much more restrictive color bar that brooked virtually no ambiguity between white and nonwhite. Previously, in many French-colonial spaces the permeability of that line had allowed free people of mixed European and non-European parentage to effectively enter the white population. Unlike in the French Caribbean, administrators on Bourbon Island would not downgrade such families to a separate nonwhite category with diminished rights. They preferred simply to ignore the issue altogether. After all, the “color” terms used on Bourbon matched those in force empire-wide, even if they did not map neatly onto their corresponding groups in the French Antilles, which had a

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<sup>2</sup> The *marquis* de Courcy and *vicomte* de Souillac to Davelu, Saint Denis, 24 July 1778. Archives départementales de La Réunion (hereafter, ADR) 20C, f37-39. [“Il n'est donc pas question dans tout cela de demander aux créols, qui ayant eu du Mélange entre leurs ancêtres auroient quelques degrés de couleur, leur généalogie, et exiger d'eux une filiation suivie depuis leurs établissements dans cette Colonie. Nous sommes même très étonnés que vous ayiez pu penser de la sorte, sans prévoir Le Scandale qui en Résulteroit; d'ailleurs jamais l'auteur de cette Instruction n'a voulu se faire entendre de cette maniere, c'est ce que le bon sens peut faire comprendre.”]

separate residual category, *gens libres de couleur*, into which fell freeborn people of mixed racial background.<sup>3</sup>

On Bourbon Island, color itself was contingent. There, whiteness, as both a vernacular and a legal category, was a capacious classification that functioned very much like a synonym for “free” in opposition to blackness, a term associated with slave status. The irregularity of that binary for many eighteenth-century outsiders to the island is encapsulated in a report one missionary offered to his superior back in France, in 1764: “[Here] blacks [refers to all] slaves, even *mistiches* or *métisses*, meaning born of a White man and a Negress.” By contrast, “whites (*blancs*)” applied to all “free people, even though some are black or very dark-skinned (*fort bazannés*).”<sup>4</sup> The contemporary observations of a British visitor to the island echo the missionary’s disbelief: “not a fiftieth part of the free natives are really white.”<sup>5</sup> For Bourbon’s last Ancien Régime governor, writing his superior, the governor-general of the Mascarenes (Bourbon and Isle de France, or Mauritius), in 1788, that proportion was closer to three-fourths of the total white population. If transported to the Caribbean or even neighboring Isle de France, this population would certainly “fall under the imperial decrees applied to people of color.”<sup>6</sup> All three men suggest that Bourbon’s racial categories (especially whiteness) were curiously inconsistent with those that underpinned other European colonial

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<sup>3</sup> Bourbon Island had no “free-colored” category to designate mixed-race free people, as in the French Americas. “Free people of color” (*gens de couleur libres*) emerged as a distinct legal category in the late eighteenth century, but was used infrequently and was largely interchangeable with *Noirs libres* (free blacks), which was applied to manumitted slaves and their descendants. A separate census category, *Libres* (freemen), encompassed that group as well as freeborn South Asian and Malagasy immigrants. Terms denoting racial mixture that were common on official documents in the French Americas (*quarteron, mulâtre*...) were virtually non-existent on Bourbon. Unofficially, some families and individuals were reputed “*de sang-mêlé* (“mixed-blooded”), meaning that although legally and even socially accepted as white, they were known to have one or more non-European ancestors.

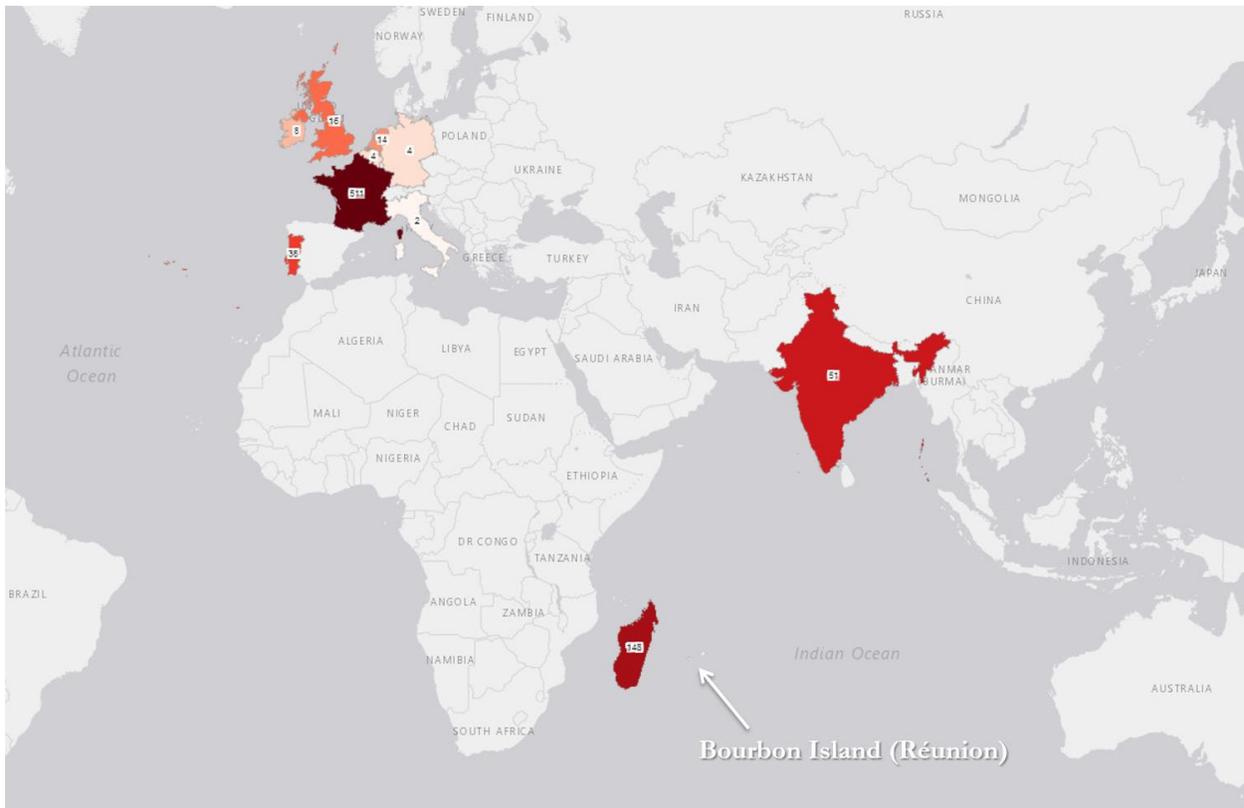
<sup>4</sup> Philippe Albert Caulier to the Superior of the Congrégation de la Mission (letter fragment), Bourbon Island, 1764, Archives de la Congrégation de la Mission (or “Lazarists,” hereafter, ACM) 1504, f. 55.

<sup>5</sup> “Observations on the Isle of Bourbon, in 1763, by an Officer in the British Navy,” in Charles Grant, Viscount de Vaux and Louis Charles Grant, *The History of Mauritius, or the Isle of France, and the Neighbouring Islands, from Their First Discovery to the Present Time, Composed Principally from the Papers and Memoirs of Baron Grant, Who Resided Twenty Years in the Island, by His Son, Charles Grant, Viscount de Vaux* (London: G. and W. Nichol, 1801), 166.

<sup>6</sup> “...On ne peut assimiler l’Isle de Bourbon à l’Isle de France ni aux Isles de l’Amérique ; les trois quarts de Bourbon sont dans le cas de l’ordonnance qui regarde les gens de couleur.” Cossigny de Charpentier to d’Entrecasteaux, no. 14, Saint Denis, 8 July 1788. ADR L93

societies. Whiteness was defined to a greater extent by local tradition than by putative biological difference. When it came to racial categories, the first French colonial empire hewed closely to that model on Bourbon Island more than anywhere else. There, free status and social consensus, rather than phenotype, made a person “white.”

Bourbon’s settlement history produced a distinct brand of racial thought that transcended the tripartite structure that we typically associate with French slave societies. Since the earliest days of settlement in the 1660s, a local convention held that (legitimate) mixed-race children inherited the white legal status of their fathers. They were never branded “people of color,” as in the Caribbean. By 1789, over three-quarters of the island’s officially white population descended from non-European pioneers who had arrived in the seventeenth century and married European settlers.



Birthplaces of the grandparents of white adults censused on Bourbon, 1711 (Modern Country Borders). 72% of Creole (island-born) whites have at least one non-European grandparent (Indian or Malagasy). Source: Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, FM DPPC G1477.

By examining administrative correspondence in conjunction with reports produced for the benefit of France's colonial ministry on the topic of whiteness on Bourbon Island, this chapter traces the parallel evolution on Bourbon and in the wider French empire of policies regarding the color line (and, specifically, the contours of whiteness as a category) between the Seven Years' War and the close of the Ancien Régime. This source base provides a useful lens through which to view the dynamism of imperial decision-making. Collectively, these writings reveal the surprising ways in which Bourbon Island both challenged and helped refine the taxonomy of race in the broader French empire. Bourbon Island's white population, at 8,182 in 1787, accounted for only 12 percent of all whites censused across the totality of France's slave colonies, yet that group (including members of it and opinions about it) exerted an outsized influence on decision-making about whiteness in the empire.<sup>7</sup>

As historians of French empire have demonstrated, in the latter third of the eighteenth century, the cultural construction of race became an arena of contention and contestation throughout the French colonial world. While most scholarship has focused on the Atlantic dimensions of those processes, the role of the French Mascarenes, in the Indian Ocean, has been largely neglected. This chapter builds on a historiographical trend that has begun to challenge conventional wisdom that the highly centralized nature of France's colonial bureaucracy left little room for *ad hoc* solutions or *bricolage* management strategies. These scholars invite us to consider the careers of the men who made those decisions, whose trajectories often crisscrossed France's empire, and who thus carried experience and expertise to each next engagement.<sup>8</sup> There was thus wide

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<sup>7</sup> Comparative population statistics from Frédéric Régent, *La France et ses esclaves: de la colonisation aux abolitions, 1620-1848* (Paris: Pluriel, 2012), 335–37.

<sup>8</sup> William A. S. Brown, "Learning to Colonize: State Knowledge, Expertise, and the Making of the First French Empire, 1661-1715" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2016); Alexandre Dubé, "Making a Career out of the Atlantic: Louisiana's Plume," in *Louisiana Crossroads of the Atlantic World*, ed. Cécile Vidal (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 44–67; Mélanie Lamotte, "Making Race: Policies, Sex and Social Orders in the French Atlantic and Indian Oceans, c. 1608-1767" (Book Manuscript, 2019).

latitude for disagreement in the imperial construction of color, and this process was informed by direct experience with a wide array of colonial contexts. These were not strictly trans-Atlantic itineraries; they often spanned both the Atlantic and Indian Ocean spheres of France's empire. The Mascarenes were as much a laboratory for the making of race as were the French Antilles.

Approaching these questions globally serves two purposes. Firstly, it destabilizes a narrative that has emerged as a corrective to the old truism that "the French exhibited a unique 'openness to peoples of other races and cultures.'" <sup>9</sup> A new wave of historiography contends that, in fact, French racial thought was decidedly less "flexible" than other empires', notably Britain's, which permitted individuals of mixed race who were several generations removed from their African ancestors to apply for white status, and Spain's, which allowed nonwhite men to purchase access to the prerogatives reserved for whites from the Crown. <sup>10</sup> Historians have uncovered so few examples of individuals successfully "whitening" themselves through either of these mechanisms, however, that they seem to represent an exception that proves the rule. "Whitening" provisions were designed to reinforce authorities' control over the social development of their colonies, rather than make them more inclusive. <sup>11</sup> Secondly, contextualizing Bourbon Island within France's wider empire helps challenge another historiographical narrative, prevalent in Francophone scholarship, that sees

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Hodson and Brett Rushforth, "Absolutely Atlantic: Colonialism and the Early Modern French State in Recent Historiography," *History Compass* 8, no. 1 (2010): 107.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Traver, "The Benefits of Their Liberty?: Race and the Eurafricans of Gorée in Eighteenth-Century French Guiana," *French Colonial History* 16 (2016): 8.

<sup>11</sup> As Ann Twinam shows, only a minority of applicants successfully secured white status from the Crown in the Spanish Americas (40 for the entire eighteenth century). The whitening *gracias al sacar* ultimately functioned more as a tool of racial exclusion than inclusion. Ann Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness: Pardos, Mulattos, and the Quest for Social Mobility in the Spanish Indies* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015). In Jamaica in the 1730s, argues Daniel Livesay, British officials were desperate to increase the number of whites in order to counterbalance the growing African enslaved population (whom they feared would revolt), that they allowed individuals of color more than three generations removed from an African ancestor to apply to become legally "white." Daniel Livesay, *Children of Uncertain Fortune: Mixed-Race Jamaicans in Britain and the Atlantic Family, 1733-1833* (Williamsburg, Virginia; Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute and University of North Carolina Press, 2018). Brooke Newman finds only one or two cases of individuals securing whiteness through that mechanism. She argues that authorities on Jamaica opened up the provision in order to create a system they could regulate that was malleable enough that they could make exceptions if they felt it necessary. Brooke N. Newman, *A Dark Inheritance: Blood, Race, and Sex in Colonial Jamaica* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

Bourbon Island as so exceptional in its laxity (or, for some, lack) of “color prejudice” as to constitute an aberration.<sup>12</sup> Such conclusions overlook that on Bourbon, as in every other European slave colony, a group deemed “white” was empowered to command and subordinate a group deemed “black.” Thus race remained the single most important axis of distinction.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the fact that essentially the same racial system, predicated on white supremacy, existed from the Indian Ocean to the Caribbean—at a time when the average voyage from France to Asia and back took 16-18 months<sup>14</sup>—demonstrates just how pervasive and powerful that system was.<sup>15</sup>

Whiteness was indeed fungible on Bourbon, but that fact did not make the island an anomaly. Scholars have uncovered cases, from the seventeenth through the early nineteenth centuries, of individuals, families, or whole communities of mixed European and non-European ancestry being recognized as white across numerous French colonial spaces, as well as vestigial corners of the French empire that passed under the dominion of British, Spanish, or U.S. empires.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jean-Luc Bonniol and Jean Benoist, “Hérités plurielles: Représentations populaires et conceptions savantes du métissage,” *Ethnologie française* 24, no. 1 (1994): 62; Régent, *La France et ses esclaves: de la colonisation aux abolitions, 1620-1848*, 202. Régent declares Réunion the exception to the statement “On the eve of the French Revolution, color prejudice is established in the ensemble of French colonies...” The myth endures in popular culture as well. See Euzhan Palcy, *Les Mariées de l'île Bourbon*, Television Film, 2007; Lewis Trondheim and Olivier Appollodorus, *Bourbon Island 1730 [Graphic Novel]* (New York: First Second, 2008). Such conclusions inadvertently echo the statements of pro-slavery apologists from the Mascarenes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who often argued that both slavery and legalized racial hierarchy were much more benign in the Indian Ocean colonies than in the Caribbean.

<sup>13</sup> In existing at all as social boundaries to be regulated and policed, all racial lines had power, wherever their exact position. As Ann Stoler reminds us, “Hierarchies of privilege and power were written into the condoning of interracial unions, as well as into their condemnation.” Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 76.

<sup>14</sup> Philippe Haudrère, *L'Empire Des Rois: 1500-1789* (Paris: Denoël, 1997), 179–82.

<sup>15</sup> This point raises a question for further research: the degree to which ships carrying ideas from other empires—Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, United States, Malagasy, Omani, Mysorean, Chinese, and so forth—contributed to racialization in the Mascarenes.

<sup>16</sup> On such cases in Martinique and Guadeloupe, see Jessica Pierre-Louis, “Les Libres de couleur face au préjugé : franchir la barrière à la Martinique aux XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles” (Thèse de doctorat, Antilles-Guyane, 2015); Frédéric Régent, “Les Blancs métissés en Guadeloupe au XVIIIe siècle,” *Ultramarines* 24 (2004): 25–28; Frédéric Régent, “Le métissage des premières générations de colons en Guadeloupe et à l'Île Bourbon (Réunion),” in *Mariage et métissage dans les sociétés coloniales: Amériques, Afrique et Îles de l'Océan Indien (XVIe-XXe siècles)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015), 111–32. For the cases of Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Tobago, see Tessa Murphy, “The Creole Archipelago: Colonization, Experimentation, and Community in the Southern Caribbean, c. 1700-1796” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2016). On Les Saintes, see Jean-Luc Bonniol, *Terre-de-Haut des Saintes: contraintes insulaires et particularisme ethnique dans la Caraïbe* (Paris: Editions caribéennes, 1980). Several of New Orleans’s oldest white creole families derived in part from Amerindian or African female ancestors. Joan M. Martin, “Plaçage and the Louisiana Gens de Couleur Libre: How Race and Sex Defined the Lifestyles of Free Women of Color,” in *Creole: The History and Legacy of*

Clearly, whiteness, like all racial categories, did not follow a single set of rules across France's vast empire; yet the fact that most of the scholars who have uncovered those stories have qualified them as exceptional outliers belies the staying power of the narrative of a steadily hardening color line across the eighteenth century and into the next, bending toward a kind of "one-drop-rule" of racial purity. That progression stands to be revised.

### **Control and the Color Line: Contrasting Bourbon Island and Saint-Domingue**

The French state began its forays into overseas settlement in earnest in the seventeenth century. Louis XIV's chief minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, judged that integrating Christianized non-Europeans into the fold of French society would advance the economic and religious imperatives of French expansion. Therefore, seventeenth-century imperial policy tended to encourage official marriages between French men and local non-European women, from New France to the Caribbean to Madagascar. Historians generally perceive a shift away from that policy in the eighteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

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*Louisiana's Free People of Color*, ed. Sybil Kein (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 57–70. On the sometimes capacious boundaries of "whiteness" in French enclaves in West Africa, see George E. Brooks, *Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003); Hilary Jones, *The Métis of Senegal: Urban Life and Politics in French West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Guillaume Aubert, "'Nègres ou mulâtres nous sommes tous Français': Race, genre et nation à Gorée et à Saint-Louis du Sénégal, fin XVIIe-fin XVIIIe siècle," in *Français?: La nation en débat entre colonies et métropole (XVIIe-XIXe siècle)*, ed. Cécile Vidal (Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2014), 125–47; Barbara Jean Traver, "After Kourou: Settlement Schemes in French Guiana in the Age of Enlightenment" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Washington State University, 2011); Pierre Force and Susan Dick Hoffius, "Negotiating Race and Status in Senegal, Saint Domingue, and South Carolina: Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol and Her Descendants," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 16, no. 1 (February 13, 2018): 124–50. For studies of the social conventions that allowed certain individuals to "pass" as white in the Caribbean, and the subsequent reversal of that phenomenon in some jurisdictions, see: Régent, "Les Blancs métissés en Guadeloupe au XVIIIe siècle"; Léo Elisabeth, *La société martiniquaise aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles: 1664-1789* (Paris; Fort-de-France: Karthala; Société d'histoire de la Martinique, 2003); Pierre-Louis, "Les Libres de couleur face au préjugé." Settlers of mixed European, Amerindian, and African background in the North American Great Lakes region were accepted as "white" by dint of their economic independence and French-era land claims that predated U.S. control of their region. Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, *Great Lakes Creoles: A French-Indian Community on the Northern Borderlands, Prairie Du Chien, 1750-1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Guillaume Aubert, "'The Blood of France': Race and Purity of Blood in the French Atlantic World," *William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2004): 439–78; Saliha Belmessous, *Assimilation and Empire: Uniformity in French and British Colonies, 1541-*

There was already a trend against intermarriage with non-Europeans even earlier in the southwest Indian Ocean. Beginning in 1694, colonial officials in the Mascarenes, convinced that earlier assimilationist policies had failed, began imposing bans on intermarriage and then, in 1723, on all interracial conjugal partnerships (including “*concubinage*”). The king ordered no such bans in the colonies of Martinique, Guadeloupe, or Saint-Domingue (the colonial name for Haiti). The Crown may only have cracked down on cross-racial liaisons in the Indian Ocean colonies at the request of East India Company officials, apparently frustrated that the frequency of such relationships was undermining the racialized labor system they were attempting to impose in the region.<sup>18</sup> In practice, administrators on Bourbon accepted breaches of the Crown’s restrictions on interracial sex and marriage.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, the French Crown became the principal driver of what scholars have identified as a codification of “color prejudice,” an eighteenth-century term for the disdain among “unmixed” whites for people of any non-European ancestry. New laws resulted in the gradual erosion of rights and privileges of free persons “of color.” In the 1760s and 1770s, the Crown specifically targeted the Caribbean colonies’ increasingly wealthy group of planters of partial African descent.<sup>19</sup> It passed increased restrictions on social mobility for free men of color, barring

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1954 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jennifer M. Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> The first imperial intermarriage ban is sometimes erroneously traced to the Code Noir issued for Louisiana in 1724. In fact, the exact language of its article forbidding marriage between “white” and “black” subjects of the Crown appeared in the *Lettres Patentes* of the king serving as a slave code for the Mascarenes which was issued in 1723. That document was produced upon the request of frustrated East India Company officials looking for an official codification of the local slave system. André Scherer, *Histoire de La Réunion* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1965), 19. As Sue Peabody points out, in contrast to Bourbon Island, Louisiana and its nascent capital at New Orleans did not yet have a substantial population of free people of mixed European and African in the 1720s. Sue Peabody, *Madeleine’s Children: Family, Freedom, Secrets, and Lies in France’s Indian Ocean Colonies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 56. The 1674 *ordonnance* of De La Haye declared “Deffenses aux francais d’Epouser des Nègresses, cela dégouteroit les noirs du Service, et Deffenses aux Noirs d’épouser des Blanches, c’est une confusion à éviter.” ANOM 6DPPC 2707 “Extrait des Registres du Greffe du Conseil Supérieur de l’Isle de Bourbon Du premier Decembre Mil Six cent Soixante quatorze. Ordonnance de M. Delahaye Lieutenant general des armées navales de Sa Majesté a Saint Paul.” This may have been the first such intermarriage ban in issued in France’s colonial empire.

<sup>19</sup> John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 4.

them from holding certain socially privileged occupations, including goldsmiths, doctors, lawyers, and priests.<sup>20</sup> The result of these measures was not merely increased discrimination toward men and women already classified as “colored,” but the relegation of whole families from the “white” to the “free people of color” sections of colonial censuses.<sup>21</sup> This was not merely humiliating; in some jurisdictions it implied loss of more than social clout: in the Lesser Antilles and French Guiana, white Creoles were exempt from the militia duties and tax burdens imposed on people of color.<sup>22</sup>

The tone and justification of those laws, which emphasized “white purity and mixed-race degeneracy,” attested to a broader shift in French racial thought. The “new racism,” to borrow John Garrigus’s expression, no longer justified exclusion from whiteness based on longstanding cultural rationales but on putatively biological grounds. For generations, colonial logics of whiteness in the French Antilles had been grounded in considerations that had less to do with physiognomy than with wealth and respectability. But French imperial policy increasingly insisted on the inferiority of free people of color because of their non-European “blood.” It was a stubborn “stain” they inherited that even generations of intermarriage with Europeans—could never wipe away.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Miranda Frances Spieler, “France and the Atlantic World,” in *A Companion to the French Revolution*, ed. Peter McPhee (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 68.

<sup>21</sup> For such cases in Saint-Domingue, in particular, see: Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 61; Stewart R. King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-Revolutionary Saint Domingue* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 158–79; Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, 45–49; Trevor G. Burnard and John D. Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 18, 68, 137.

<sup>22</sup> Since 1683, the intendant-general of the “Isles d’Amérique” had imposed the *capitation* (head tax on slaves owned) on all foreign-born whites and free people of color, but not creole whites. Thus on Guadeloupe and Martinique, especially, there was a financial benefit for the empire in reclassifying people accepted as “white” to free-colored status: they were obliged to pay certain taxes that local whites were not required to pay. In Saint-Domingue and the Mascarenes, however, every free householder was subject to the same taxes. Yvan Debbasch, *Couleur et liberté. Le jeu de critère ethnique dans un ordre juridique esclavagiste* (Paris: Dalloz, 1967), 53 n2. On the issue of militia service requirements for free people of color in Saint-Domingue, see Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, 109–39.

<sup>23</sup> The language of these new laws signal a rising belief in the transmission of immutable racial traits or “essences” from generation to generation. These ideas had deeper roots in Medieval discourses surrounding aristocracy and lineage, which transformed into anxieties over racial “blood purity” in the early French colonial world. See Debbasch, *Couleur et liberté. Le jeu de critère ethnique dans un ordre juridique esclavagiste*; Saliha Belmessous, “Assimilation and Racialism in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century French Colonial Policy,” *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 2 (April 1, 2005): 322–49; Aubert, “The Blood of France”; Guillaume Aubert, “Kinship, Blood, and the Emergence of the Racial Nation in the French Atlantic World, 1600-1789,” in *Blood and Kinship: Matter for Metaphor from Ancient Rome to the Present*, ed.

Colonial elites in the Caribbean rallied to the exclusionary innovations of the monarchy. Superior Council magistrates, intendants, and governors in the colonies began promulgating laws intended to cleave “unmixed” whites from those known or believed to have African ancestry. Variations of one law issued first in Guadeloupe (1763), then in Martinique and Saint-Domingue (1773), ruled against the use of “white” surnames by people of color.<sup>24</sup> “Usurping the name of a white family (*d’une race blanche*),” Saint-Dominguan lawmakers declared, “destroys the insurmountable barrier between whites and people of color which public opinion has established, and which the Government, in its wisdom, maintains.”<sup>25</sup> A Martinique regulation the following year required people “of color” to mark their racial status next to their name, including individuals whose wealth or social position had long allowed them to “pass” as white on official documents.<sup>26</sup> In 1779 a new sumptuary statute restricted people of color from wearing or even owning certain luxury items, in order to prevent “the assimilation of people of color with white persons.” The same law enjoined even freeborn “people of color...to show the greatest respect.... to all whites in general, on pain of legal action.” Doubly humiliating, the 1770s saw new laws obliging priests and notaries to demand documentary proof of free status from all people of color registering an official deed, and even freeborn men and women of color in the Caribbean were increasingly categorized as *affranchis*

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Christopher H. Johnson et al. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 175–95. On English or Iberian concepts of “blood purity” in the Americas, see James H. Sweet, “The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1997): 143–66; Jean-Paul Zúñiga, “La voix du sang. Du métis à l’idée de métissage en Amérique espagnole,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 54, no. 2 (1999): 425–52; David Nirenberg, “Was There Race before Modernity? The Example of ‘Jewish’ Blood in Late Medieval Spain,” in *The Origins of Racism in the West*, ed. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac, and Joseph Ziegler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 232–64; María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness: Pardos, Mulattos, and the Quest for Social Mobility in the Spanish Indies*; Holly Brewer, “Slavery, Sovereignty, and ‘Inheritable Blood’: Reconsidering John Locke and the Origins of American Slavery,” *The American Historical Review* 122, no. 4 (October 1, 2017): 1038–78.

<sup>24</sup> Régent, *La France et ses esclaves: de la colonisation aux abolitions, 1620-1848*, 195.

<sup>25</sup> “Reglement des Administrateurs concernant les Gens de couleur libres, du 24 Juin et du 16 Juillet 1773.” In Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Lois et constitutions des colonies françaises de l’Amérique sous le vent*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1785-90), Tome V, p. 448-449.

<sup>26</sup> Régent, *La France et ses esclaves: de la colonisation aux abolitions, 1620-1848*, 195.

(literally, freedman or ex-slave), a term that underscored the supposed intractability of the “stain” of slavery in a person’s lineage.<sup>27</sup>

On Saint-Domingue, in particular, political concerns helped accelerate the correspondence of pigmentation and social status. After the Seven Years’ War ministers in Versailles and their agents in the Caribbean were dealing with an increasingly unruly free population, unified across race.<sup>28</sup> Free Creoles of all racial backgrounds had gained a reputation for a strong autonomist streak. They tended to flout the *Exclusif*, the policy that the metropole should have a monopoly of all commerce between France and its colonial markets and between those markets and the wider world.<sup>29</sup> Although permitted by the 1685 Code Noir, in 1766, Minister of the Navy Choiseul ordered the royal governor of Saint-Domingue to discourage marriages between “the two populations” as part of a deliberate divide-and-rule strategy.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, those measures would not prevent white Creoles and free people of color from joining forces in the southern parishes of Saint-Domingue to revolt against the Government’s new militia service requirements and cancellation of a temporary wartime suspension of the *Exclusif*, in 1769.<sup>31</sup>

Over the next two decades, Saint-Domingue would undergo significant demographic changes. As the largest and most lucrative holding in France’s imperial portfolio, the colony saw a rapid increase in fortune-seeking migrants from France. With limited resources available, however, breaking into the planting business proved nearly impossible for many. Tensions between

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<sup>27</sup> Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, 4; Burnard and Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine*, 186.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Frostin, “Les ‘enfants perdus de l’État’ ou la condition militaire à Saint-Domingue au XVIIIe siècle,” *Annales de Bretagne* 80, no. 2 (1973): 317–43; Charles Frostin, *Les révoltes blanches à Saint-Domingue aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles (Haïti avant 1789)* (Paris: l’École, 1975).

<sup>29</sup> See Jean Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l’ancien régime: l’évolution du régime de l’exclusif de 1763 à 1789*, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1972). The *Exclusif* was established in 1727 and based on the mercantilist principles of Colbert. After the Seven Years War, the strict enforcement of this policy was considered untenable. An “exclusif mitigé” (mitigated *Exclusif*) emerged. From 1763 to 1789, the French Crown attempted variously to uphold and circumvent the *Exclusif*.

<sup>30</sup> Régent, *La France et ses esclaves: de la colonisation aux abolitions, 1620-1848*, 197.

<sup>31</sup> Auguste Lacour, *Histoire de la Guadeloupe (Basse-Terre, Guadeloupe: Imprimerie du gouvernement, 1969)*.

propertied, well-connected men of color and an increasingly resentful white population seemed to reach a breaking point in the 1770s, and administrators were happy to exploit those divisions to shift the traditional lines of allegiance. No longer would Creoles band together regardless of race, in challenging imperial authority; through its racist policies, Versailles would unify whites—poor or rich, metropolitan or island-born—in support of imperial power.<sup>32</sup>

However, while in reality administrators were responding to shifting political and demographic exigencies, the Crown's stated justification for its new color line was to maintain control of the servile population: to "inspire in all the Negros a great respect for those they serve."<sup>33</sup> Two parallel but ultimately divergent lines of argumentation emerged in imperial decrees. The first was that slavery (not color *per se*) left an indelible imprint on one's descendants into perpetuity. The second was that the racial hierarchy of slavery must manifest itself in a "visual economy," to borrow Gene Ogle's formulation, that would daily reinforce the correlation between darker complexion and subservient status, lighter complexion and higher status.<sup>34</sup> Because in the Caribbean, African ancestry was associated with slavery, the two imperatives could easily be conflated.

The logic of the color line was challenged, however, in 1767, when a Creole man from Saint-Domingue, long recognized as white but newly denounced as "colored," claimed mixed European and Amerindian (rather than African) heritage to justify registering titles of nobility passed down from his father. As nobility was traditionally forbidden to all nonwhites, local lawmakers asked Versailles for clarification on the case. In their response the king's ministers proclaimed that persons

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<sup>32</sup> Burnard and Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine*, 186.

<sup>33</sup> Debbasch, *Couleur et liberté. Le jeu de critère ethnique dans un ordre juridique esclavagiste*, 53–77.

<sup>34</sup> Gene Ogle analyzes a 1776 publication of a white Creole lawyer from the Antilles, Hilliard D'Auberteuil, who, he writes, called for a "visual economy" to relate subordination to skin color. The goal was to ensure the "mystique" of white purity as the principal safeguard against sedition among the enslaved. Ultimately, the neat spectrum imagined by d'Auberteuil would necessitate freeing mixed-race people from bondage in its goal of mapping status to skin color and ensure a strict tripartite segregation in the colony between white, black, and mixed. Gene E. Ogle, "'The Eternal Power of Reason' and 'The Superiority of Whites': Hilliard d'Auberteuil's Colonial Enlightenment," *French Colonial History* 3, no. 1 (2003): 35–50.

of mixed European and indigenous (rather than African) ancestry could not be deprived of white status, although they first had to “prove” that lineage with documents. The “essential difference between Indians (*les Indiens*) and Negros (*les Nègres*)” derived from the fact that the former “are born free (*nés libres*)” and the latter had “only been brought [to the Colonies] to remain in the state of slavery.” It was “an original stain that applies to all their descendants and cannot be removed by the gift of freedom.”<sup>35</sup>

The new rule provided an opening for Saint-Domingue Creoles with deep roots in the region whose established place in white society now came under question. Cases multiplied of individuals submitting genealogical records (some falsified) to authorities as evidence for certifications of their whiteness. The new process lent itself to abuses both by men accused of “mixed” racial ancestry and their accusers, who were often jealous or disgruntled neighbors. Of these, the “Chapuiset Affair” was perhaps the most significant, because it resulted in yet another clarification of the king’s views of the color line. In 1771, five men from a white militia company in Saint-Domingue filed a complaint against their brother-in-arms, Pierre Chapuiset de Guériné. Chapuiset was not actually white, they claimed, but “of mixed blood,” which, if true, would legally disqualify him from serving in their company. Lawyers on both sides rummaged through parish records and notarial archives to uncover Chapuiset’s genealogy. The results of both investigations agreed: he descended from a free black woman born on Saint-Christophe (Saint Kitts), a former

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<sup>35</sup> “Lettre du Ministre aux Administrateurs, contenant une decision sur trois points relatifs aux Races Noires et Indiennes [7 January 1767],” in Médéric Louis Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Loix et constitutions des colonies françoises de l’Amerique sous le vent...depuis 1766 jusqu’en 1779 inclusivement*, vol. V (Paris: L’Auteur, 1785), 80. The language of the legislation did not in fact include the term “white,” but maintained that “ceux qui proviennent d’une Race Indienne, doivent être assimilés aux Sujets du Roi originaires d’Europe, et qu’ils peuvent, en consequence, prétendre à toutes les charges et dignités dans les colonies...” The same royal decision reaffirmed, moreover, that “those who derive from a Negro Race (*d’une Race Negre*)” were not only barred from all public functions and charges in the colonies, but “exclude[d] even more so from the Nobility.” This was an old prohibition in the Caribbean, even for men who married such women. In 1703 two Breton colonists in the French Antilles had been deprived of their own titles of nobility for having “married mulatresses,” first by the Superior Council of Martinique and then by the Ministry of the Navy itself. Debbasch, *Couleur et liberté. Le jeu de critère ethnique dans un ordre juridique esclavagiste*, 49.

French colony from which many of Saint-Domingue's oldest families had fled after an English attack in 1702. While Chapuiset's opponents argued that any amount of African ancestry left an indelible stain, even after many generations, his lawyers pointed to generations of local tradition that held that whiteness was often accorded by social consensus and not exclusively tied to European origins. Saint-Domingue's highest court ruled in favor of Chapuiset, confirming a notarized document he had already secured in 1771 that had declared him to be legally white.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, the outrage from the island's poor whites was so violent that the governor and intendant of Saint-Domingue withdrew Chapuiset's officer appointment. Disadvantaged whites demanded a color line, and the Crown provided. In 1780, the King's Council, the handful of the monarch's closest ministers who met in closed sessions in the Chateau de Versailles to decide the policy of the kingdom, issued a response to the Chapuiset Affair. "In the Colonies," the Council declared, "we take great care to distinguish those who descend from naturally free races (*de race franche, libre et ingénue*), not having [among their ancestors] any...mixture with slave blood, the introduction of which the [early] colonists' needs forced [on them]." Only such unmixed individuals should enjoy the label "white" and its attendant social privileges. Conversely, "anyone whose ancestor had the misfortune of [entering into an] unsuitable marriage (*se mésallier*) with slaves [must be] relegate[d] to a separate class." Allowing slippage across that line of demarcation risked the complete collapse of colonial society.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> On the Chapuiset Affair, see Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, 141–70.

<sup>37</sup> "Extrait des Registres du Conseil d'Etat [27 April 1780]" in "Bayon de Libertat, Antoine François, avec Robillard, Jean Jacques Mauvesin et Béraud, habitants de la plaine du Nord et officiers des milices du bataillon du Cap-Français, à Saint-Domingue, contre Chapuizet de Guériné (Pierre), accusé par eux d'être de sang mêlé (1700/1785)." ANOM E21. The term "*se mésallier*" denoted a marriage of two socially unequal parties. ["La perte des Esclaves, la portion la plus précieuse des biens de colons et l'abandon de la culture, seront les moindres de inconveniens de ce renversement. La vie même des Colons cesseroit d'être en sureté et les Colonies Seroient livrées à un désordre auquel il seroit inutile de chercher le Remede, Cest par cette raison qu'on a tant de soin d'y distinguer ceux qui descendent de race franche, libre et ingénue sans aucune mesalliance sans melange avec le sang des Esclaves que les Besoins des Colons ont forcé d'y introduire; et de releguer dans une Classe separée Ceux qui comptent parmy leurs ancetres quelqu'un qui ait eu le malheur de se mésallier avec ces Esclaves"]

In alluding to the “needs” of early colonists in the Caribbean, the Crown seemed to drop all pretenses to universal application and acknowledge the specific gendered dynamic of the inheritability of “slave blood.” In the minds of the members of the King’s Council, seventeenth-century French pioneers in the Americas were by default male, in invoking their “needs,” they made an oblique reference to the scarcity of European women. In circumstances in which most of the women in the colonies would have been enslaved Africans the colonists’ “needs” whether purely sexual or borne of a desire to pass property down to legitimate heirs according to French customary law, nevertheless translated into what the Crown ultimately considered regrettable *mésalliances* (unsuitable marriages). Versailles thus reproduced what it had come to understand as the standard model for a theoretical cross-racial pairing: black was female, white was male—a gendered assumption that even French dictionary entries for “white” had come to reflect.<sup>38</sup> That gender dynamic was significant in the colonial context, where the institution of slavery had necessitated special regulations early on: while name and other privileges could be passed down patrilineally, slave status was inherited through the womb (according to the legal principle of *partus sequitur ventrem*). It was in the blood.<sup>39</sup>

The logics undergirding the concept of the perpetual inheritability of servile status was therefore not entirely new. However, it seemed to fly in the face of the Code Noir of 1685 (as well

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<sup>38</sup> In the 1694 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, “white” was “used when speaking of peoples who have a white or even olive complexion, in contrast to the Moors.” The example that followed was: “This child is the son of a white man & a black woman, or else, of a black man and a white woman.” By the 1762 edition the definition remained unchanged (although “Moor” was replaced with “black”), but retained only the first part of the sample sentence, implying that a union between a white woman and a black man was inconceivable, or at least much less frequent than the inverse. *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* 1694, Tome I: “Blanc au subst. Se dit en parlant des peuples qui ont le teint blanc ou mesme olivastre, à la difference des Mores. *Cet enfant est fils d' un blanc & d' une noire, ou bien d' un noir & d' une blanche*”; *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*. Quatrième Édition. T.1 [1762]. The entry from the fifth (1798) edition is identical. Note the gendered implication in the omission of “...ou bien d'un noir & d'une blanche” in the two later editions. <https://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/dictionnaires-dautrefois>. Accessed 10/03/2017. Interestingly, although a mixed-race situation forms the basis of the sample sentence, it offers no clues as to whose status a child of mixed parentage would follow.

<sup>39</sup> As Jennifer Morgan reminds us, the condition of slavery had been deliberately conceived as matrilineal and ineradicable in European colonial societies. Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 3.

as the 1723 version in force in the Mascarenes), which declared manumitted slaves to enjoy “all the benefits of natural-born [French] subjects.”<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, the Crown’s 1780 statement (and the 1767 decision it confirmed) also undermined the notion that status should map neatly onto skin color or ethnic origin, opening up a loophole for darker-complexioned groups of any ethnic origin to access whiteness provided they sprang from freeborn persons exclusively—populations like the Creoles of Bourbon Island.

Indeed, in 1776, that argument had been successfully advanced in favor of a group of African colonial subjects. After the Seven Years’ War, the Navy Ministry relocated a community of wealthy men and women of mixed European and African heritage from Gorée, off the coast of Senegal, to French Guiana. Rather than allow this group’s wealth and connections to serve the British, who had just conquered Gorée, Versailles hoped to resettle them on French territory, where they could continue to contribute to the empire. Upon arrival in the Americas they were initially classified as nonwhite, but they immediately appealed to Versailles for full legal equality with white subjects on the basis that their maternal lineages included only men and women from the élite of West Africa; none of them had ever been enslaved, and neither had their African forebears.<sup>41</sup> In 1776 the Ministry decided in favor of the group’s petitions, declaring that the 1767 decision issued for Saint-Domingue had made an error in denigrating African ancestry generally. “It was slavery and not color that imprints an indelible stain on Negroes.” The Ministry’s 1767 letter “presumes that Negroes are only introduced into our Colonies as slaves and...exempts Indians of that stain [of slavery] even though they do not possess white [skin] color.” Therefore “the emigrants from Gorée

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<sup>40</sup> “Lettres patentes en forme d’édit concernant les esclaves nègres des Isles de France et de Bourbon,” (December 1723), registered by the Superior Council of Bourbon on 18 September 1724. In Jean-Baptiste Etienne Delaleu, ed., *Code des Isles de France et de Bourbon [1777]*, Deuxième Édition, vol. I (Port-Louis: Tristan Mallac & Cie., 1826), 248; *Le code noir ou Recueil des réglemens rendus jusqu’à présent concernant [...] [I]es nègres dans les colonies françaises* (Paris: Chez L.F. Prault, 1788).

<sup>41</sup> In 1770, two years after the arrival of the Goréens in Guiana, a perplexed census-taker had marked members of this group as “African” rather than either “white” or “free people of color.” Traver, “The Benefits of Their Liberty,” 12.

who are of free race (*de race libre*) and who travelled voluntarily to Cayenne [Guiana],” and not in the hold of a slave ship, “should at least be treated like the Indians (*les sauvages*).”<sup>42</sup>

Significantly, the chief advocate for the Goréens had served as an administrator on Bourbon Island before being stationed in Senegal. In his appeals in favor of the Goréens’ behalf, Pierre-Félix Barthélemy David, had underscored not only their free pedigrees but also their light complexions. They bore “no trace of the color of their ancestors” and were “generally whiter than the *habitants* in the Islands.” David’s implication was that many “*habitants*”—shorthand for (white) colonial planters—“of the Islands” had dark complexions, and the only “islands” David had direct experience with were the Mascarenes. Bourbon Island may have provided a template. As David well knew, populations of non-European origin—even those with darker physical features—could and did enjoy status as white in the empire already.<sup>43</sup> While lawmakers had restricted access to white status for “mixed-blooded” whites in Saint-Domingue, they would not follow suit on Bourbon Island. Why was Bourbon Island so different?

### **Bourbon Island Creoles and the French Empire**

The French monarchy emerged from the Seven Years’ War having lost its vast territorial gains in North America and South Asia. But the Crown retained two constellations of islands and coastal enclaves in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans: in the former, the profitable sugar colonies of the Caribbean and French Guiana; in the latter, the strategically valuable Mascarene Islands and trading posts on the Indian Subcontinent. As in the Caribbean, the Government was determined to

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<sup>42</sup> Jean Tarrade, “Affranchis et gens de couleur libres à la Guyane à la fin du XVIIIe siècle, d’après les minutes des notaires,” *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer* 49, no. 174 (1962): 90 n2.

<sup>43</sup> “...Aucune marque de la couleur de leurs ancêtres...plus blancs que ne le sont communément les habitans des Isles.” Quoted in Traver, “The Benefits of Their Liberty,” 24 n64. Pierre-Félix Barthélemy David had been governor of Senegal (1738-1746) and governor-general of Bourbon and Isle de France (1746-1753) for the Compagnie des Indes. Apparently he never set foot in Guiana, although he orchestrated the evacuation of the Gorée families.

retain social and economic control over these holdings in order to maximize their utility for the empire. In the Indian Ocean, France hoped to catch up with Britain in the realm of maritime commerce—as best it could, given its reduced set of resources in the region. The French East India Company was financially ruined, in part because it had been forced to divert so much of its shipping capacity to the war effort. After long disputes with its shareholders, the Crown decided to reinstate it as a purely commercial entity and assumed civil administration of the Mascarenes, which it purchased from the Company to help offset its outstanding debts.<sup>44</sup> Versailles invested heavily in the islands' commercial and military infrastructure, and sent a new set of administrators to oversee the overhaul in 1767.<sup>45</sup>

Based in Isle de France, the royal administrators' principal objective was to improve and expand that colony's port to accommodate more French vessels en route to Asia.<sup>46</sup> Port Louis, the administrative center and busiest harbor in the Mascarenes, became the naval base from which to police those shipping lanes—a role it served well during the American, and later, French Revolutionary Wars.<sup>47</sup>

To feed this growing number of soldiers and sailors, the Crown turned Bourbon Island into the breadbasket of Isle de France.<sup>48</sup> Bourbon's provisioning sector would also sustain the increasing

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<sup>44</sup> Auguste Toussaint, *Histoire des Îles Mascareignes* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1972), 63–66.

<sup>45</sup> The 1763 Treaty of Paris restored to France its holdings in India. For France's minister of the Navy, the *duc* de Choiseul, the most pressing postwar issue in the Indian Ocean was maintaining commerce to rival Great Britain. Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 56–90; François-Joseph Ruggiu, "India and the Reshaping of the French Colonial Policy (1759-1789)," *Itinerario* 35, no. 02 (August 2011): 34.

<sup>46</sup> Toussaint, *Histoire des Îles Mascareignes*, 70–76.

<sup>47</sup> The Ministry allocated over one-fifth of its colonial budget in 1769 to the Mascarenes, including newly commissioned ships, revealing the Crown's new prioritization of the East Indies. Annual spending on the Mascarenes continued to rise. The Ministry approved a budget of 5.4 million *livres tournois* for 1769, to be spent mostly on metropolitan manufactures to be sent to the colonies and for the payment of Crown officers there. "Dépenses de France: Etat des Dépenses à faire en France pour le service des Colonies pendant l'année 1769." ANOM, F<sup>2C</sup>8 (unfoliated). The expenditures that colonial administrators made on the Mascarenes rose to eight million *livres* yearly by the mid-1770s. Min. of the Navy (Sartine) to Maillart, 23 April 1775. ANOM F<sup>3</sup>1, ff. 55-56.

<sup>48</sup> Some estimates were 3 to 4 million pounds of wheat from Bourbon to Isle de France, which came especially from the western and southwestern coasts. The Crown bought *habitants'* staples and coffee for a fixed price, fulfilling the colony's principal purpose. Officials in Port Louis were often forced to rely on supplies from Madagascar, but ships laden with

volume of merchant vessels calling at the Mascarenes.<sup>49</sup> Ships anchored at Bourbon on their return trips from Port-Louis and points beyond, and typically stayed four to five weeks, slowly stocking up on water, cereals, cured meats, and oranges.<sup>50</sup>

All of this activity proved a windfall for Bourbon planters.<sup>51</sup> Upon word of France's official entry into the War of American Independence in 1778 Bourbon's *habitants* boosted cereals production, looking forward to a rise in demand from the arrival of warships and a better price for their grains. The rush turned wheat and other staples (wheat, corn, and dried vegetables).<sup>52</sup> New

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wheat, corn, and vegetables plied the stretch of sea between the two islands, constituting the single largest departure point of ships entering Port Louis in 1787. 24 per cent of arrivals to Port Louis in 1787, representing 34 ships, had come from Bourbon. "Calendrier des Isles de France et de Bourbon pour l'année Bissextile 1788," in ADR, 20Cbis.

<sup>49</sup> On lengths of voyages, see Philippe Haudrère, *Les Compagnies Des Indes Orientales: Trois Siècles De Rencontres Entre Orientaux Et Occidentaux, 1600-1858* (Paris: Desjonquères, 2006), 136. On the provisioning trade in the Indian Ocean, see Jane Hooper, *Feeding Globalization: Madagascar and the Provisioning Trade, 1600–1800* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017), 7–10.

<sup>50</sup> Haudrère, *Les Compagnies Des Indes Orientales*, 129. Planters in the parish of Saint Paul especially took advantage of their town's unique position alongside the best anchorage in the island, protected from the strong northeasterly winds. In the words of one visitor in the 1770s, its "*habitants*, who are very rich, do no other business than supplying vessels with provisions. Any ship leaving the Isle of France either for Europe or any other part comes to St Paul to get its provisions." These included wheat, meat, and oranges, to stave off scurvy. Joseph Maximilien Cajetan, Baron de Wiklinski, *Les voyages de Joseph Maximilien Cajetan, Baron de Wiklinski [c. 1782]*, ed. Anne-Marie Nida (Port Louis, Mauritius: Mauritius Stationary Manufacturers, Ltd., 2004), 114.

<sup>51</sup> Between 1771 and 1776, merchandise from "Les Isles de France et de Bourbon" sold at Lorient yielded a total of 6,897,949 *livres tournois*. The average annual revenue was 985,421. The best year for sales in Mascarene merchandise was 1771, in which revenue reached 1,906,171 *livres*. Still, that figure amounted to only 1.36% of Jean Tarrade's estimates of the total value of New World colonial exports in 1771. Twenty years later, however, one estimate placed the total value of Bourbon's coffee, cotton, and spices at eight million livres "argent de la colonie." Tirol (Civil Commissioner) to Min. of the Navy, St Denis, 30 July 1793. ANOM C<sup>3</sup>22. Meanwhile, traders in the islands made much higher profits on sales of Chinese goods (7,399,808 per year) and Indian goods (10,935,682). The best year for all French Indian Ocean commerce was 1776, in which 27.5 million livres tournois were made in sales in the single port of Lorient—still, the number pales in comparison to the profits made on West Indian commerce. The value of New World colonial exports to France in 1771 had exceeded 140 million livres. For Indian Ocean trade figures, see "Relevé Général du produit net, escompte à dix pour cent déduit, des Marchandises des Indes, de la Chine, et des isles de France et de Bourbon, provenant du commerce particulier, depuis la suspension du Privilège exclusif de la Compagnie des Indes de France, et dont la vente s'est faite publiquement au port de l'Orient dans les années ci-après [1771-1778]," in the paperwork related to the liquidation of the Compagnie des Indes, in ADR 3C. For commerce statistics for the French West Indies, see Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial*, II: 739-740.

<sup>52</sup> During the War of American Independence, the parish of Saint Paul alone reportedly provided enough wheat to provision three large convoys. Claude Wanquet, *Histoire d'une Révolution. La Réunion, 1789-1803*, vol. I (Marseille: Éditions Jeanne Laffitte, 1980), 23–34. Bourbon's principle staples products were corn (effectively the basis for most local alimentation), and over half of it was not for re-export but for local consumption. The biggest export grain was wheat, and much of it was destined for passing ships and the bakeries of Port Louis. Royal administrators purchased one million pounds of wheat to cover the needs of royal employees and public bakeries; the rest was exported—mostly to Isle de France. Bourbon exported 50,000 pounds of wheat and another 12,000 in beans to a desperate Portuguese governor of Mozambique in 1777; and over 400,000 pounds of grains to the Cape in 1786; at other moments of shortage in the 1770s, shipments of grains were sent to European enclaves in India, and even, on one occasion, to France itself. For a deep study of the overall effectiveness of Bourbon's role as "granary" of the French Indian Ocean in this period,

royal policies helped revive the coffee sector, in particular, which had experienced a decline under Company rule since the 1740s. Louis XV's 1769 decision to dissolve the monopoly of the French East India Company allowed prices to rise.<sup>53</sup> Bourbon planters responded by ramping up production. Annual Bourbon coffee exports began to rival the output levels of Guadeloupe.<sup>54</sup> The coffee renaissance, like the reinvigorated market for cereals, brought new fortunes to those Bourbonnais who had the slaves and land to increase production. In many cases, those were propertied Creole families with deep roots on the island.<sup>55</sup>

Thus a mutually beneficial relationship was established between the empire, which relied on Bourbon's farms to feed its troops, and Mascarene colonists, who profited from rising prices. Consequently, while the fealty of free Creoles in the French Caribbean remained dubious throughout much of the eighteenth century, Bourbon Island's Creoles gained a reputation in the

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see Joël Bertrais, "L'agriculture à Bourbon au temps des Compagnies (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles) produire des vivres et des denrées coloniales, une gageure ?" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Université de Provence, Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines, 2004).

<sup>53</sup> What Bourbon's *habitants* were most concerned with was the fixed prices the king would offer for their produce. Versailles had continued the system begun by the Compagnie des Indes, whereby colonists were forced to sell all or a proportion of their harvests to the authorities at a fixed rate. The *arrêt* of the king's Conseil d'Etat of 13 August 1769 (confirmed by that of 6 September), which suppressed the monopoly of the Compagnie, permitted an increase in the price the government would pay for colonists' coffee. Production peaked after in the early years of the Revolution, when taxes were reformed, hitting 40,000 *balles* the early 1790s. Wanquet, *Histoire d'une Révolution. La Réunion, 1789-1803*, I:35.

<sup>54</sup> This despite adverse tax policies from Versailles and ever-increasing competition from cheaper Antillean brands. Bourbon coffee exports rose from 20,000 in the 1770s to over 33,000 *balles* (or 3.3 million pounds) by 1788. Coffee harvests for 1787-1788 reportedly yielded 33,337 *balles* of coffee (each *balle* being equivalent to 100 pounds). Wanquet, I:35. In 1789, Guadeloupe exported 37,300 *quintaux* (also 100 pounds) to the metropole; Martinique, 68,161; and Saint-Domingue, 679,827. Pierre Pluchon, *Histoire de la colonisation française: le premier empire colonial*, vol. 1 (Paris: Fayard, 1991), 1025.

<sup>55</sup> Under the Compagnie coffee exports had peaked around 1744, with Bourbon alone exporting 2.5 million pounds. By then, the Compagnie had already been exporting coffee heavily since the 1720s, and "*café Bourbon*" became something of a household name in France. By that time, lower quality but cheaper coffee products from the Antilles had surpassed the quantity coming out of the Mascarenes; they also could not compete with more favorable taxes for Atlantic products than their own; prices began dropping after 1742 vis-à-vis Antillean competitors. Even in the Indian Ocean, true "Moka" variety began outcompeting Bourbon exports for quality and taste. Around that time the Compagnie's governor-general, Mahé de la Bourdonnais, stopped encouraging coffee agriculture and pushed Bourbon *habitants* to develop staples agriculture in Bourbon (rice, wheat, corn, and manioc, which he had personally imported from the Americas for the nourishment of slaves). Bourdonnais had also spelled Bourbon's doom by shifting the center of administrative and port operations in the region to the better harbor of Port Louis, on Isle de France. Coffee exports experienced a steady decline, falling close to a million pounds in the last years of Compagnie rule. See J. M. Filliot, *La Traite des Esclaves vers les Mascareignes au XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: ORSTOM, 1974), 56–58.

glowing reports of colonial officials, as loyal, dutiful, patriotic French subjects.<sup>56</sup> These accounts echoed earlier tropes about the sacrifice of Bourbonnais volunteers in the Indian Ocean theaters of France's wars with Britain, stretching back to the 1740s. As discussed in chapter 1, a broad range of commentators, from armchair *philosophes* in Paris to France's ally, Sultan Hyder Ali Khan, extolled the courage and dependability of Bourbon's Creole fighters. After 1767, no single Crown official did more to advance this glowing portrait than the first royal governor of Bourbon, Guillaume Léonard de Bellecombe, who had himself fought the British on the Plains of Abraham outside Quebec City in 1759. He described the white Creoles of Bourbon as "naturally brave, intelligent, and excellent for war."<sup>57</sup> He pushed for adequate compensation as well as military honors for veterans of the wars in India, some of whom had returned "riddled with wounds."<sup>58</sup> The sincerity of Bellecombe's praise notwithstanding, the governor also made the occasional Machiavellian admission to his superiors: "we will be able to do anything we want if we know how to lead them."<sup>59</sup>

Apparently, for Bellecombe, "leading" Bourbon Island's Creoles entailed curbing disparagement of that population for its non-European ancestry, a subject he never evoked in his official correspondence with the metropole. However, during Bellecombe's tenure as governor, the

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<sup>56</sup> Major uprisings fomented by free colonists rocked the Antilles in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In Martinique and Saint-Domingue alone there were revolts (sometimes on both islands at the same time) in 1665-1668, 1669-1671, 1693, 1711, and 1722-1723. Haudrère, *L'empire Des Rois*, 248. Others are outlined in Frostin, *Les révoltes blanches à Saint-Domingue aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles (Haïti avant 1789)*.

<sup>57</sup> H. de Bellecombe, *Essai biographique sur Guillaume-Léonard de Bellecombe* (Agen: Veuve Lamy, 1896), 294-96.

<sup>58</sup> Ordonnance, Versailles, 22 February 1770. ANOM B201, p. 389. See also, Bellecombe to the Min. of the Navy (Sartine), "Réflexions et observations de la part de M. de Bellecombe Concernant les meilleurs arrangemens à prendre pour le Gouvernement et l'Administration des Isles de France et de Bourbon et sur nos Etablissements dans l'Inde," January 1776. ANOM C<sup>3</sup>19, Pièce 268. Choiseul-Praslin established a new "Légion" in the Indian Ocean for European regulars in which Creoles were explicitly barred from serving, a flood of "representations in their favor" persuaded him to reverse his position. Choiseul-Praslin's successor, Antoine de Sartine, hesitated when Des Roches wrote a decade later that he thought that only white creoles should be given the exclusive privilege to serve in a "Volontaires de Bourbon" corps as a concession for being barred from the Légion, which would lose its "esprit militaire" if it were not led by better-disciplined ("plus exercés") European officers. Min. of the Navy (Choiseul-Praslin) to Des Roches (governor-general of Isle de France and Bourbon), Versailles, 22 February 1777. ANOM B201, p. 385v. The Volontaires de Bourbon was reestablished as a privileged corps for a brief stint between 1779 and 1789. Vigoureux Duplessis, "Corps des Volontaires de Bourbon," 1 August 1793, ADR L414.

<sup>59</sup> de Bellecombe, *Essai biographique sur Guillaume-Léonard de Bellecombe*, 294-96.

minister of the Navy, the *duc* de Choiseul, was working to standardize imperial policy using the blueprint of the Antilles, which included the division of free people in the colonies into white and colored sections.<sup>60</sup> This imperative was explicit in the language of the *ordonnance* (royal decree) reforming local militias into “National Troops” in every colony. However, Bellecombe decided to implement the *ordonnance* in a way that did not disrupt local conventions of race. Bellecombe rode to every parish on the island to personally oversee the formation of each new company. He reported his recruitment criteria to the Ministry: “I placed each planter relative to his status (*état*), his talents and his fortune.” He reserved the best positions for “the most notable planters (*habitants*) and those who would be the most acceptable to the lower-status Creoles (*au Bas créole*).” Perhaps for that reason, Bellecombe tended to prefer established property owners who had historically served in high-ranking militia positions, which included Creoles of all racial backgrounds, rather than independent European arrivistes or transitory postholders.

This decision created considerable resentment. Not all Bourbon residents welcomed the openness of administrators like Bellecombe to their peers of mixed ancestry. In 1770, Bellecombe’s own colleague, financial commissioner (*ordonnateur*) Honoré de Crémont, sent a dispatch to the Minister of the Navy in Versailles to protest the governor’s appointment of three men to the colony’s highest court, the Superior Council. In particular, Crémont warned that the choice of Jean Vally was unwise because his wife’s family “numbers among those known locally as families of mixed blood.” Such families, he wrote, were “numerous in this colony, and it is an indispensable

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<sup>60</sup> Choiseul ordered the application, generally, of “the dispositions that have been made for the Islands of America.” Jean-Baptiste Etienne Delaleu, *Code Des Isles de France et de Bourbon*, Deuxième Édition (Port Louis: Tristan Mallac & Cie., 1826), 209. The categorization imperative of royal agents in the Mascarenes was consistent with a grander imperial project that scholars have yet to fully unravel outside of its consequences in the Caribbean. In 1763, the minister of the Navy, Étienne François de Choiseul, extended “American” legal codes first to the recently restored West African slaving post of Gorée. Perhaps he reasoned that its reliance on slavery, the presence of a slim “white” minority, and prominent mixed-race population, would make it amenable to Antillean social structuring. See Eugène Daubigny, *Choiseul et la France d’outre-mer après le traité de Paris: étude sur la politique coloniale au XVIIIe siècle, avec un appendice sur les origines de la question de Terre-Neuve* (Paris: Hachette et C<sup>ie</sup>, 1892), 213.

necessity that the members of the Superior Council, which hands down judgments of last resort, be exempt from [such] families.” Crémont claimed that their “stain (*tâche*) debased them in the eyes of the [other] colonists (*habitants*) and makes them likely to never be chosen as arbiters in cases between individuals.”<sup>61</sup> Crémont’s reasoning appears to have convinced the ministry: Vally was not awarded the promotion. Notably, however, at no point did Crémont object to Vally’s—or any other “mixed-bloods”—legal white status.

Others who resented Bellecombe’s policies sent their complaints to the Ministry anonymously. One report submitted in 1785 denounced Bellecombe, who by then had left the island, for opportunism in his dealings with the island’s Creoles. Bellecombe had exploited “the profound vanity that predominates among [them] and taken advantage of their weakness by giving them epaulets and decorations.” In exchange, he “acquired their women, their coffee, and their money.”<sup>62</sup> A second report, also penned around 1785, was far more vituperative. The disgruntled author of “Observations on the Militia of Bourbon Island (*Observations sur les Milices de l’Isle de Bourbon*)” may have been a French immigrant who felt snubbed by Bellecombe’s alleged preferences.<sup>63</sup> He resented the governor’s method of granting officer appointments based on “value received” in coffee, which, he alleged, disproportionately privileged Creole property-holders, many

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<sup>61</sup> Crémont to Min. of the Navy (Praslin), Saint Denis, 15 March 1770. ANOM C<sup>3</sup>13, pièce 85. [“vulgairement connues sous le titre de familles de sang mêlé...une pareille tache les avilit aux yeux des habitans”] That “stain” had not prevented Vally from serving on the Council as an assessor since 1767. Jean Vally arrived in Bourbon in 1752. He served as secrétaire of the Superior Council and, subsequently, as assesseur to the same body. Albert Jauze, *Notaires et notariat : le notariat français et les hommes dans une colonie à l’est du cap de Bonne-Espérance : Bourbon-La Réunion, 1668-milieu du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Publibook, 2009), 78 n195. He married Marie Barbe Catherine Juppín de Fondaumière (1741-1811) in 1755, whose maternal grandmother was Catherine Héros, “a *Mestice* [perhaps a corruption of *mestiça*, from the Portuguese] woman from the Indies” (“une Femme des Indes Mestice”), born c. 1671, in Surat. “Liste des habitans De Lisle Bourbon, Enfants et Negres (September 1690)” ANOM G1/477. For Full genealogies in Lucien Jacques Camille Ricquebourg, *Dictionnaire généalogique des familles de l’île Bourbon (La Réunion) 1665-1810* (Mayenne: Imprimerie de la Manutention, 1983), 2804, 1197.

<sup>62</sup> “Isle de Bourbon,” (Anonymous Report), 1785. ANOM, F3/1, ff. 95-96.

<sup>63</sup> “Observations sur les Milices de l’Isle de Bourbon, sur leur origine, sur leur formation, sur leur composition, sur leur abus, sur leur Régime, sur leur depense en tems de Guerre, sur leur Depenses en tems de Paix, sur les Priviléges des Commandants de quartiers, sur les abus, et sur les Moyens d’y remedier” (Unpublished Manuscript, 1785). ANOM C<sup>3</sup>19, Pièce 325.

of whom were of non-European ancestry.<sup>64</sup> These families then promoted from within their own networks, leaving “well-born” and “well-married (*bien alliés*)” figures with fewer opportunities to attain even subaltern officer positions. There were few paths to social mobility for an immigrant from France unwilling to marry into a Creole family network and thus, most likely, sacrifice one’s “purity” of blood.<sup>65</sup>

Most egregiously, for the writer of “Observations on the Militia,” Bellecombe had created the “problem of color” in Bourbon through his tendency to reward Creoles of mixed ancestry, whom the author provocatively (and inaccurately) referred to as “mulattos.” Following the precedent set by Bellecombe, his successors continued to “disfavor gentlemen and men of high birth” in granting officer appointments. “Mulattos are preferred . . . Whites are oppressed.”<sup>66</sup> Three-fourths of all militia officers in the colony were “mulattos,” and three out of the five militia captains (*commandants de quartier*) appointed since Bellecombe had begun his tenure as governor had married “mulatresses.” Although some appeared “very white,” their “black” ancestry was nevertheless universally known. In the capital parish of Saint Denis only four *officiers majors* had married what the author called “white-bloods (*des sang-blanc*),” his term for island-born people of exclusively European ancestry.<sup>67</sup> For the author of “Observations,” the danger of rewarding such men lay in the fact that they (or their wives) “may have relatives still in slavery or [who were] ex-slaves.” By the Crown’s own logic, this was precisely why marriages between whites and parties of African descent—no matter how far removed from that ancestry—was problematic: it undermined the hereditary “stain” of slavery that was supposed to ensure the subordination of the enslaved.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> “Observations sur les Milices de l’Isle de Bourbon,” 1v–13.

<sup>65</sup> “Observations sur les Milices de l’Isle de Bourbon,” 3.

<sup>66</sup> “Observations sur les Milices de l’Isle de Bourbon,” 3.

<sup>67</sup> The term “sang blanc,” used to describe an individual or family of exclusively European descent, is used in the legal code of Martinique as well. M. Durand-Molard, *Code de la Martinique*, Nouvelle édition, 5 vols. (Saint-Pierre, Martinique: Jean-Baptiste Thounens, fils; Imprimeur du Gouvernement, 1807).

<sup>68</sup> In this regard, the author of “Observations on the Militia” echoed earlier writings from Saint-Domingue. In 1750, a white Saint-Dominguan man who had served as a member of the Léogane Council, published an influential book, *Le*

For the author of “Observations,” the consequence of the decisions by successive governors since Bellecombe was that Bourbon had fallen woefully out of step with the rest of the empire on the issue of the color line. The white Creoles of some Bourbon parishes were so dark-skinned as to be confused with slaves. “If [the colonial official] Le Brasseur could only witness a review of the militia of Saint-Benoît,” he wrote, “I’m certain he would think, what a fine cargo of slaves we have here (*voilà une belle traite*).” In some districts outside of the capital, he railed on, not “one-fifth or even one-tenth” of the white population were “truly white.” The author seems to have intended his report to alert employees at the Ministry to the dangers of Bourbon’s idiosyncratic application of imperial law regarding whiteness.<sup>69</sup>

But all of this wasn’t simply irregular or improper: tolerance of Bourbon’s racial conventions risked exposing the metropole to men with hidden “black blood.” Most of the high-ranking military or civil administrative positions were “given [to] men [whose] fortune enables them to travel to Europe,” and there, masquerading as white Frenchmen, they were already “spread[ing] black blood (*le sang noir*)” throughout the mother country. The Government therefore ran “the risk of a consequence as gruesome as those that have just been remedied through the ban on Blacks entering

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*Patriotisme américain*, in which he argued that marriage between Europeans and free people of color should be outlawed because of the low status associated with slavery and bastardy. After all, honorable French people did not even stoop so low as to marry theater actors. People of color retained relatives in slavery, and their “blood [was] infamous for its inclinations and dangerous for its blackness of character.” Cited in Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, 113.

<sup>69</sup> One of these intended addressees may have been Joseph Alexandre Le Brasseur, whom the author of “Observations” mentioned by name. Le Brasseur had just been dispatched by the Ministry to clean up the finances of the Mascarene colonies. Having already enjoyed a long administrative career for the Navy in Senegal and, most recently, Saint-Domingue, Le Brasseur would have been familiar with the ways race operated elsewhere in the empire. Joseph Alexandre Le Brasseur began his Indian Ocean career as *ordonnateur* (in charge of finances) of Bourbon in February 1784, but was immediately reposted to Port Louis, first as commissioner-general of the Ports and Arsenals of the Navy in August and then as intendant-general of both islands in April of 1788 just long enough to write a report on the islands’ finances before returning to France. He may never have set foot on Bourbon. He had served as an administrator on the island of Gorée in 1774 and was also fresh from a stint as Saint-Domingue’s intendant in 1780-1782. ANOM E267. Le Brasseur had denounced free people of color while based on Isle de France for their “insubordination,” which may explain the author’s liberal use of racist language. Claude Wanquet, “La Perception des problèmes de couleur dans les Mascareignes pendant la Révolution et le syndrome domingois,” in *La révolution française et Haïti: Filiations, ruptures, nouvelles dimensions*, ed. Michel Hector, vol. II (Port-au-Prince: Deschamps, 1995), 224.

Europe.” For the author of “Observations on the Militia of Bourbon Island,” allowing colonists who were “of color” (whether they looked it or not) to travel to France was surely, as he put it, “against the spirit of the [laws] of the French government.”<sup>70</sup>

These dire warnings cannot simply be chalked up to paranoid hyperbole. The author of “Observations on the Militia” appears to have been aware that the risk of spreading “black blood” in the metropole had been an explicit source of anxiety for the Ministry in the 1770s. It had served as the main justification for a 1778 ban on marriages between whites and “blacks, mulattos, or other people of color” in metropolitan France.<sup>71</sup> It was also cited as a major motivation for the “Police des Noirs” decrees of 1777 and 1778, which forbade entry into metropolitan French ports of all “negroes and mulattos, and other people of color,” even if they were free.<sup>72</sup> But what would be the priorities of the new Navy administration, which changed leadership in 1780? And how would the new minister respond to the other information that circulated to the metropole about Bourbon Island’s white Creole population?

### **Bourbon Island Creoles in the Metropole**

If “Observations on the Militia of Bourbon Island” was read at all in Versailles, it seems not to have had any effect on policymaking. Charles de La Croix de Castries, who became Navy minister in 1780, did not share the racist views of previous administrations. However, he did not immediately

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<sup>70</sup> Here the author refers to France’s August 1777 “Police des Noirs” legislation, which blocked all “people of color,” slave or free, from entering metropolitan France. The text of the Police des Noirs had never been published on the island in its original language. Nor had the Superior Council of Bourbon registered it on the local law books. Delaleu, *Code des Iles de France et de Bourbon [1777]*.

<sup>71</sup> On 5 April 1778, the Conseil d’état of King Louis XVI forbade clergy in France from celebrating marriages between whites of any sex and “blacks, mulattos, or other people of color.” Pierre H. Boule and Sue Peabody, *Le droit des noirs en France au temps de l’esclavage: textes choisis et commentés* (Paris: Éditions l’Harmattan, 2014).

<sup>72</sup> Sue Peabody, *There Are No Slaves in France: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 85. Ordered by Sartine, a minister who counted planters among his relatives, such measures may have indicated a “transfer of colonial attitudes” from the Antilles to the metropole. Pierre H. Boule, *Race et esclavage dans la France de l’Ancien Régime* (Paris: Éditions Perrin, 2007), 91. It marked one of the first times a major legal text was produced in the metropole that made no distinction between slaves and free people, but rather lumped them together as nonwhite and equally undesirable. Boule, 106.

undo his predecessors' exclusionary policies, recognizing how contentious the race had become in the colonies, especially Saint-Domingue. Rather than empire-wide policy changes on the scale preferred by Choiseul or Sartine, Castries generally opted for discrete recommendations for administrators that tended toward a more elastic and contextual color line.

A small but influential community of Bourbon Island Creoles living in the metropolitan capitals, along with retired colonial officials with experience on the island, may have influenced Castries' shift in decision-making. Beginning in the regime of the French East India Company, elite Bourbon islanders had begun making the perilous journey to France for business or to seek more promising careers. Educational opportunities were scarce in the islands, and the majority of Bourbonnais in France were boys whose wealthy fathers enrolled them in boarding schools in the metropole.<sup>73</sup> In May 1778, then minister of the Navy, Antoine de Sartine, guaranteed that white Mascarene children sent to France for their studies would have their room and board covered by the treasury.<sup>74</sup> Given the stringency of his ban on "people of color," Sartine was likely unaware that many of these children traced their maternal lineages back to Malagasy or Indian ancestors.

During Castries's tenure, the number of Bourbon Island colonists travelling to France rose, thanks in part to the ministry's new imperial priorities. Castries, who had served briefly as a delegate to the Government from the East India Company (1764-1769), would prove much more interested in developing the Indian Ocean sphere of the empire than his predecessors in the Navy.<sup>75</sup> In the

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<sup>73</sup> Their numbers doubtless leveled off when in 1759, the Compagnie opened a boarding school for creole boys in the heart of Saint Denis, the Collège Saint-Cyprien, but may have risen again when Crown administrators decided the space was better suited as a barracks for royal troops. The original building of the *collège* survives in Saint Denis. Olivier Caudron, "Esquisse d'une histoire intellectuelle des îles Mascareignes aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles," in *Sulla via delle Indie orientali: aspetti della francofonia nell'Oceano indiano*, ed. Paolo Carile (Fasano: Schena, 1995), 341–96; Jean Barassin, "Le collège Saint Cyprien, 1751-1795," *Bulletin de l'Académie de l'Île de la Réunion* 23 (1968 1967): 7–34; Emile Trouette, *L'Île Bourbon pendant la période révolutionnaire, de 1789 à 1803*, vol. 1 (Paris: Challamel & Cie., 1888), 24–27.

<sup>74</sup> Sartine to Foucault, Versailles, 10 May 1778. ANOM B205, p. 111v. That decision was made five years after Bellecombe had first raised the issue with Sartine's predecessor in his letter to the Minister of the Navy [Pierre Étienne Bourgeois de Boynes], No. 67, St Denis, 26 October 1773, ADR 56A, f. 132v.

<sup>75</sup> Jean Tarrade, "L'administration coloniale en France à la fin de l'Ancien Régime : Projets de réforme," *Revue Historique* 229, no. 1 (January 1, 1963): 103–22; Jean Tarrade, "Le maréchal de Castries et la politique française dans l'Océan Indien

wake of the War of American Independence, Castries determined to fully integrate the Indian Ocean holdings into his global imperial vision. He forged a new economic system that made dynamic use of both private entrepreneurs and official trading companies to boost French commerce in the Indian Ocean. In 1785, he oversaw the creation of a new East India Company, but restricted its monopoly to India, China, and the Arabian Peninsula, and he established the Mascarenes as bulking entrepôts for those regions' merchandise. He suspended the *Exclusif* in order to open the islands up to private commerce, which benefitted not only the merchants of Isle de France but also the coffee, cotton, and provisions suppliers of Bourbon.<sup>76</sup> Castries further expanded opportunities for merchants based in the Mascarenes by allowing their ships to sail directly to the Americas to trade, bypassing the once-necessary stopover in France.<sup>77</sup> In 1787, Castries declared Port Louis a “free port,” open to all “neutral” nations, which proved an even greater boon for Mascarene commerce. By the end of the Ancien Régime, the volume of ships passing through Port Louis from Atlantic regions—especially the United States—began to rival the number of vessels trading within the Indian Ocean.<sup>78</sup> Private

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à la fin de l’Ancien Régime,” in *Révolution française et océan Indien: prémices, paroxysmes, héritages et déviances : actes du colloque de Saint-Pierre de La Réunion*, ed. Claude Wanquet and Benoît Jullien (Paris: Harmattan, 1996), 39–48.

<sup>76</sup> Philippe Haudrère, “Quelques Aspects du Commerce entre la France et l’Asie à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle (1765-1793),” in *Révolution Française et Océan Indien: Prémices, paroxysmes, héritages et déviances*, ed. Benoît Jullien and Claude Wanquet (Paris: Harmattan, 1996), 31–38; Tarrade, “Le maréchal de Castries et la politique française dans l’Océan Indien à la fin de l’Ancien Régime.”

<sup>77</sup> “Modification du privilège par rapport aux Isles de France et de Bourbon [14 April 1785],” in “Analyse sommaire...de tous les Edit, Déclarations, Arrêts et Réglemens contenus dans le Code de l’Ile de France.” Delaleu, *Code des Iles de France et de Bourbon [1777]*, I:293.

<sup>78</sup> In the 1780s, 40 to 50 ships per year sailed between Port Louis and France. Silvia Marzagalli, “The French Atlantic World in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World, c. 1450 - c. 1820*, ed. Nicholas Canny and Philip Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 242. In 1788, 200 ships called at Port Louis from an increasingly wide range of Atlantic destinations beyond France itself. Haudrère, *L’empire Des Rois*, 366. By the early 1790s, 90% of Bordeaux’s extra-European shipping was to and from the Mascarenes—nearly the same share as to Martinique or all of Africa. Paul Butel, “Les Ports Atlantiques français et l’Océan Indien sous la Révolution et l’Empire, l’exemple de Bordeaux,” in *Révolution française et océan Indien: prémices, paroxysmes, héritages et déviances : actes du colloque de Saint-Pierre de La Réunion*, ed. Claude Wanquet and Benoît Jullien (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996), 86. No site on Bourbon was given the same privilege, despite the remonstrations of that colony’s Superior Council, articulated in a 21 April 1788 session of the body: “Messieurs Greslan et Desmazieres, ont rendu compte à la Cour, qu’en Exécution de son Arrêt du Trois Mars dernier, qui les nomme Commissaires pour Rédiger les Remonstrances que la Cour a arrêté qu’elle présentera au Roi, pour le supplier de faire participer sa Colonie de Bourbon, à la même admission au Port Louis, Isle de France, par l’Arrêt de son Conseil d’Etat du [27 Mai 1787]...par le susdit Arrêt du [3 Mars 1788].” ANOM C<sup>3</sup>20, Pièce 20. Many of these vessels came from ports on the eastern seaboard of the United States. U.S. merchants, eager to bypass British sources of Asian teas and textiles, forged an agreement with officials in the Mascarenes to use the islands as a port of call on the route to the East Indies, and 19 ships in 1789 to 49 in 1796 and 99 by 1805, brought goods and

slaving operations in the Indian Ocean also provided new links to the Americas and new fortunes for Mascarene suppliers.<sup>79</sup>



Portrait of Michelle de Bonneuil (1748-1829), c. 1778

The Indian Ocean colonies were booming, the fortunes of their merchants and planters were on the rise, and more and more colonists were travelling to France for business or education. Most of the Bourbonnais who came to France were clustered in urban centers. Men and women with ties to the French Indian Ocean colonies transformed Lorient, in Brittany, for example, which had been founded at the end of the seventeenth century as the main port for shipping to and from the East Indies, as the city's name implied.<sup>80</sup> But it was France's capitals, Paris and Versailles, that most attracted Bourbon Islanders. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, author of the successful romance novel *Paul et Virginie*, inspired by his travels to the Mascarenes, recalled that white Creole women from Bourbon were reputed to be among "the most beautiful women" in Paris.<sup>81</sup> A young Polish officer in the

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newsprint (and hearsay) from the Atlantic to the Mascarenes. The Americans sent consuls to represent their trading interests in Port Louis. See Auguste Toussaint, *Early American Trade with Mauritius* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Esclapon, 1954); James R. Fichter, *So Great a Profit: How the East Indies Trade Transformed Anglo-American Capitalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>79</sup> Before 1769, slaving in the Indian Ocean had remained within the purview of the East India Company. Between 1702-1767, the various iterations of the *Compagnie des Indes* shipped 2,000-3,500 slaves from West Africa (mostly from Gorée and Whydah) to the Mascarenes. Beyond that date virtually no slaves arrived from West Africa, besides a final voyage in 1767. Filliot, *La Traite des Esclaves vers les Mascareignes au XVIIIe Siècle*. After Port Louis was made a free port (1787), the colonists of Isle de France had an important advantage over their Antillean counterparts: closer access to the Indian textiles desired by West African buyers. Robert Louis Stein, *The French Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century: An Old Regime Business* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 119–26. French slavers organized the voyages that transported 53,384 enslaved people from the Indian Ocean into the Atlantic (out of a total of 542,668 forced in that direction by European slavers between 1624 to 1860). Richard B. Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500-1850* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2015), 21.

<sup>80</sup> Gérard Le Bouëdec, "La culture Océan indien dans le pays de Lorient au XVIIIe siècle," in *Les relations entre la France et l'Inde de 1673 à nos jours*, ed. Jacques Weber (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2002), 221–32.

<sup>81</sup> "Solitudes de Bourbon." Extract in Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and Robert Chaudenson, *Voyage à l'Isle de France: texte augmenté d'inédits avec notes et index* (Rose Hill [Mauritius]: Editions de l'océan Indien, 1986), 424–25.

French army observed, “they were the admiration of Versailles and all the societies of that great city.”<sup>82</sup> Among the most infamous of these Creole women was Françoise Augustine d’Esprémesnil, *née* Sentuary. Raised on her father’s plantation on Bourbon, she married the son of the French governor of Pondicherry and moved to Versailles where she ran a *salon*.<sup>83</sup> Her sister, Michelle de Bonneuil, educated in a convent in Bordeaux, became famous for her talents in singing and painting in Paris, where she dabbled in freemasonry and carried on an affair with John Paul Jones. Creole men were also putting Bourbon Island on the map in the 1780s. The Bourbonnais poets Évariste Parny and Antoine Bertin, rose to stardom in the court of Louis XVI, where they introduced “Creole poetry” to the French reading public. Parny became the first native of France’s colonies to be elected to the Académie Française.<sup>84</sup> These influential Bourbonnais shared a common background: all of them descended from one of the few white families on the island who traced their genealogy to French—rather than Malagasy or South Asian—female ancestors. Thus, the most conspicuous representatives of the island in the imperial capital hailed from its “whitest” families.<sup>85</sup>

Bourbon Island Creoles in the metropole were not entirely unrepresentative of the white population of the island. It is not clear how many there were of the type Parny qualified derisively as resembling their slaves in manners and “almost in color (*à la couleur près*).”<sup>86</sup> But some data can be gleaned from a general census of the island for the year 1787, on which 104 free persons were

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<sup>82</sup> Cajetan, Baron de Wiklinski, *Les voyages de Joseph Maximilien Cajetan, Baron de Wiklinski [c. 1782]*, 128. The young Wiklinski was apparently so broken-hearted over his unrequited love for a young *créole* woman that he tried (unsuccessfully) to take his own life with a pistol. Izabella Zatorska, “Une tragédie en deux actes : la carrière manquée de Maximilien Wiklinsky,” *Revue historique des armées*, no. 260 (2010): 18–25.

<sup>83</sup> She and her husband would be executed during the Revolution for their outspoken royalism. Olivier Blanc, *Les libertines: plaisir et liberté au temps des lumières* (Paris: Perrin, 1997).

<sup>84</sup> Catriona Seth, *Évariste Parny (1753 - 1814): créole, révolutionnaire, académicien* (Paris: Hermann, 2014), 11; Françoise Lionnet, “‘New World’ Exiles and Ironists from Évariste Parny to Ananda Devi,” in *Postcolonial Poetics: Genre and Form* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 13–34; Gwenaëlle Boucher, “Bertin et Parny. Deux frères en poésie,” in *Lumières et océan Indien : Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Evariste Parny, Antoine de Bertin*, ed. Chantale Meure and Guilhem Armand (Paris: Editions Classiques Garnier, 2017), 117–30.

<sup>85</sup> Lucien Jacques Camille Ricquebourg, *Dictionnaire généalogique des familles de l’île Bourbon (La Réunion) 1665-1810*, 3 vols. (Mayenne: Imprimerie de la Manutention, 1983).

<sup>86</sup> Cited in Raphaël Barquissau, *Les Poètes Créoles Du XVIIIe Siècle (Parny, Bertin, Léonard)* (Paris: J. Vigneau, 1949), 27–28.

declared either absentee property-owners or domiciled on the island but living abroad.<sup>87</sup> A majority hailed from the colony's upper social stratum, and slightly less than two-thirds of those residing in France were Creoles. Of that group, genealogical records establish that 71 percent were of exclusively European ancestry; 29 percent descended from at least one Malagasy or Indian ancestor, usually on their mothers' sides. Creoles of partial non-European background thus constituted a much smaller proportion of white Bourbonnais living abroad than back home. Of seven Creole individuals marked as "navigating"—likely en route to France, four were of mixed ancestry and three were not. Six Frenchmen were censused as property-owners on Bourbon with Creole wives back on the island; five of those wives were of mixed background.<sup>88</sup> It is clear that those who made the journey to the metropole for education or business hailed from the island's wealthiest, and lightest-skinned elite.

Yet the 1787 sample accounts only for Bourbonnais living abroad temporarily. Other families in France with roots on Bourbon Island had moved away from the island before the census was taken. Not counted, for example, were the Giblots, children of a former employee of the East India Company who had been raised in France. Their father, a nobleman, Charles-François Giblot, had risen through the ranks of the East India Company to become second-in-command at Isle de France before moving his Bourbon-born wife, Anne Laval, and their children to France around 1750. Raised in France, one of their children served as an officer in the Navy, winding up in Saint-Domingue. Another received a doctorate and became canon of the cathedral at Boulogne-Sur-Mer.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Only three of these individuals were not white, but described as *libres* (freedpersons or freeborn South Asians); their whereabouts were marked as unknown. Slightly less than a third of all individuals listed as absent from their domiciles on the island had been born in France.

<sup>88</sup> Names sourced from "Recensement de l'Isle Bourbon 1787," ANOM G<sup>1480</sup>. Genealogies reconstructed using Ricquebourg, *Dictionnaire généalogique des familles de l'île Bourbon (La Réunion) 1665-1810*. Of the 104 free persons domiciled in or with property on the island in 1798, most were recorded as living in France (75), but others had found themselves in Isle de France (2) or India (4), or were believed to be in transit (9 were marked simply as "navigating"). The backgrounds of 5% cannot be determined.

<sup>89</sup> "Rolle de l'Equipage du Navire Le Dauphin de Lorient, armé en 1749" (June 15, 1750), 2P, 33-II.5, Service Historique de la Défense à Lorient. Joseph Benoît Giblot Du Villeret was a sous-lieutenant de l'infanterie, and apparently served in

Anne Laval's great-grandmother had been a Malagasy woman. It is plausible that these individuals—like most of the others living in France whose ancestry could be traced back to non-European foremothers—effectively “passed” as white with little difficulty in the metropole.

That was not possible for *all* Bourbon Island Creoles living in the metropole, however. On January 11, 1778, the King issued an amendment to the law of the previous summer that stipulated that all “blacks, mulattos, and people of color” residing in the metropole register with the secretaries of the Admiralty of France or face deportation. On 21 January 1778, several days after the law was issued, a woman appeared before the Paris office of the Admiralty. Her information was recorded in the Registry of Declarations of Blacks and Mulattos: “Marie Louise Susanne, Creole of Bourbon Island, living on Saint-Marc Street declares herself to be around thirty years old, to have arrived in France in 1761...and to have married in 1768 Mr. Maizières a white man with whom she has two children, also white.”<sup>90</sup>

We cannot know whether Marie Louise Susanne registered herself as nonwhite as a voluntary precautionary measure or whether she was compelled to do so. Because she offered no maiden name, Marie Louise Susanne may even have been born to an enslaved or formerly enslaved mother. That fact alone, as we will see in the next chapter, would not necessarily prevent her from obtaining legal white status on Bourbon. Perhaps she offered all the details that she did (more than the form required), including the somewhat racially ambiguous term “Creole,” to emphasize the lightness of her complexion, or that, in fact, she could have qualified as legally white in her native Bourbon.<sup>91</sup> It is noteworthy that the secretary who transcribed the declaration (or Marie Louise

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Cap Français, Saint-Domingue. L'abbé Jean-Baptiste Onésime Giblot du Bréau, after becoming canon at Boulogne-sur-Mer was even named bishop of the restored diocese of that city under the Bourbon Restoration, but did not serve. E. Van Drival, *Histoire des évêques de Boulogne* (Boulogne-sur-Mer: Berger Frères, 1832), 269.

<sup>90</sup> The original declaration of Marie Louise Susanne, found in AN, Z1d139, no. 4, f. 13., is dated 21 May 1777.

<sup>91</sup> Jennifer Palmer suggests that most men of color in the metropole did not fill out their own declarations in the mandatory 1763 and 1777 registers of free and enslaved people of color in France. But for those who did, they took advantage of the moment to depict themselves favorably, conforming to French gender expectations in presenting themselves as husbands, fathers, heads of households and wage earners. Some even married white women from the

Suzanne herself) juxtaposed “Creole” and “white,” as if to suggest they were mutually exclusive: both terms were scrawled in the place where declarants’ “color” was to be recorded on the Admiralty’s standard form.<sup>92</sup>

Individuals like Marie Louise Suzanne, whose race was somewhat ambiguous, confounded government functionaries charged with enforcing the 1778 regulation. One agent protested that there were many “Creoles and other people of color in France,” apparently grouping Creoles among people of mixed European and non-European backgrounds, who were “born of free [parents who are] Citizens and French naturals.” Should these individuals be forced to apply for their certificate of residence as well? A note in the margin reveals that the minister reviewed the file on 28 March 1778 and decided not to make any changes to the law.<sup>93</sup>

A separate memorandum informed Versailles that “there are people of Color who by succession of mixture would be hardly recognized [as such] if one could forget about their origins; who for a long time have been assimilated with whites; is it prudent to place this type of family in the same group as slaves?”<sup>94</sup> *Gens de couleur* from the French West Indies who may not have been lucky enough to pass as white in the colonies appear to have attempted to do so in the metropole but some were nevertheless compelled to register. Antillean subjects identified with a racial epithet denoting persons of more than half European ancestry (“*mulâtre/ mulatresse*”) made up less than three per cent of those who registered, enslaved or free, on the declarations for the city of Paris. That number included several individuals who made their own declarations as “Creoles.”<sup>95</sup>

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lower ranks of French society. Jennifer L. Palmer, *Intimate Bonds: Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 160–66.

<sup>92</sup> The ministry had issued a template for the scribes of the Admiralty to follow when transcribing the so-called “declarations” of nonwhite residents which was supposed to contain the “name, nickname, sex, and color” of the individual. “Modele de déclaration (undated),” in ANOM F<sup>1B</sup>1, f. 90v.

<sup>93</sup> “Observations Pour Les officiers de L’amirauté de France au Siege Général de La Table de marbre du Palais à Paris, au Sujet de L’arrêt du Conseil du 11 Janvier 1778 Concernant Les Negres.” ANOM F<sup>1B</sup>4, Dossier III, f. 423v.

<sup>94</sup> Anonymous, “Reflexions,” ANOM F<sup>1B</sup>4, Dossier II, f. 402v.

<sup>95</sup> Pierre H. Boule, “Les déclarations parisiennes de non-blancs entre 1738 et 1790 : permanence des catégories et interchangeabilité des statuts,” *Nuevo Mundo*, December 19, 2009, 5.

Marie Louise Suzanne's is the only declaration that survives in the censuses of "Blacks and Mulattos" of a free person from Bourbon Island.<sup>96</sup> She appears to have posed a unique challenge for government employees. A note in the margin of her file indicates that it was referred to Guillaume Poncet de la Grave, royal prosecutor for the Admiralty, for evaluation. While there is no indication that Poncet de la Grave intervened to modify the status of Marie Louise Suzanne or any of her family members, it seems significant that shortly after personally reviewing the declaration, he penned a letter to the Minister of the Navy in which he asserted that "the task of white nations is to proscribe all unions between people of different colors." In that same letter, he recommended that the king ban interracial unions in metropolitan France before the "dark-skinned races multiplied and changed the color of the citizens."<sup>97</sup> Sure enough, in April 1778, the Ministry of the Navy produced a ban on marriages between whites and "blacks, mulattoes, or other people of color."<sup>98</sup> The unusual case of a single couple from Bourbon Island may thus have influenced decision-making at the highest levels of French bureaucracy about the future of mixed marriages in the kingdom.

In the 1780s, however, with the Ministry of the Navy under the leadership of Castries, racist attitudes toward people of non-European descent relaxed somewhat. Once again, the example of Bourbon Island's white Creoles played an important role. Knowledge of the uniqueness of Bourbon's Creole white population was certainly behind a 1782 *projet de loi*, or draft legislation,

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<sup>96</sup> According to historian Pierre Boule, Marie Louise Susanne is the only individual who figures on this registry from Bourbon who was not either a slave or former slave (*affranchi*). While the 1777 census of people of color living in the metropole counted a certain number of free-colored property-owners from the Antilles, none is included from the Mascarenes. Boule writes: "Se percevant comme blancs, cette catégorie de visiteur ne se déclarait pas et, sauf exception [Marie Louise Susanne], on semble avoir laissé faire." Boule, *Race et esclavage dans la France de l'Ancien Régime*, 147.

<sup>97</sup> Poncet de la Grave's letter to Sartine (Minister of the Navy) on the subject of mixed marriages is dated 19 December 1777 and is reproduced as "Doc. 5/8" in Boule and Peabody, *Le droit des noirs*, 121–22.

<sup>98</sup> Reproduced as "Doc. 5/7 'Arrêt du Conseil d'État du Roi, du 5 avril 1778, concernant les mariages des noirs, mulâtres, ou autres gens de couleur,'" in Boule and Peabody, 121. It is unclear whether the *Arrêt* was extended to the colonies. A review of the outgoing correspondence to administrators on Isle de France and Bourbon suggest that the Mascarenes did not receive it officially. A copy does appear, however, in a 1788 edition of the Code Noir. *Le code noir*, 518–20. Observers across the English Channel praised the 1770s bans on the entry of nonwhite persons and on intermarriage, citing similar worries about the "purity" of English stock should black migration from the colonies continue. Livesay, *Children of Uncertain Fortune*, 208–9.

introduced to amend the *Police des Noirs* legislation of the 1770s. The draft favored a more liberal interpretation of whiteness by proposing the removal of the words “people of color” from the language of the edict. The justification for that deletion was scrawled in a note at the top of the document: “the commissioners charged with redacting these laws were apparently unaware that nearly all of the *habitants* [planters] of the Isles de France and de Bourbon are of mixed blood (*de sang mêlé*); for that reason we believe we must remove that general denomination [‘people of color’], which, moreover, would not be disadvantageous for our other colonies.”<sup>99</sup> It follows then that only discernibly black and “mulatto” persons would have been subject to discrimination under the *Police des Noirs*. Someone, apparently, had been receptive to the concerns raised by the anonymous Admiralty officers who had written in with their complaints.

Although the amended version was never issued formally, it is notable that the text specifically invoked the Indian Ocean islands as proof of the need for a more capacious definition of whiteness in royal decrees.<sup>100</sup> Perhaps positive stereotypes about Bourbon Island Creoles had reached the ears of even the highest-placed French authorities, and that color was a contested construct. At the very least the note suggests that the architects of French imperial policy were ready to legitimize the claims to whiteness of Bourbon Island Creoles. The general shift in the 1780s toward a more inclusive approach toward light-complexioned subjects of color in the empire was largely the handiwork of two men active in the Ministry, both of whom had expertise or interest in France’s Indian Ocean empire: The Navy minister Castries and his advisor and one-time governor of Bourbon and first appointee to Saint-Domingue under the new ministry, Bellecombe.

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<sup>99</sup> “Projet d’Arrêt du Conseil [1782].” Papers of the royal Conseil d’Etat, ANOM F<sup>1</sup>B1, f. 80. The presumed date of this document from Pierre H. Boule, “Les non-Blancs de l’océan Indien en France,” in *Race et esclavage dans la France de l’Ancien Régime* (Paris: Editions Perrin, 2007), 148. [“N<sup>a</sup> Les lois de 1777 et 1778 portoient et autres gens de Couleur, mais les commissaires chargés de la rédaction de ces lois ignoroient apparemm<sup>t</sup> que presque tous les habitans des isles de France et de Bourbon sont de sang mêlé; par cette raison on a cru devoir retrancher cette dénomination générale, qui d’ailleurs ne seroit pas sans inconvénient pour nos autres Colonies.”]

<sup>100</sup> The amended version was entitled “Arrêt du Conseil d’Etat du Roi concernant les Noirs et Mulatres qui sont actuellement en France.” Boule and Peabody, *Le droit des noirs*, 114n3.

Although there were no signatories to the 1782 plan that would have expanded France's contracting definition of whiteness, it can be plausibly traced to Castries, who sought to reverse the expanding legal discrimination against free people of color in the empire. Castries's motivations were not entirely altruistic: he wanted to reward and thus encourage what he saw as the indispensable military and economic utility for the empire of *gens de couleur libres*. His vision was for an elevated population of free men of color to serve as a buffer against sedition among a vast and growing servile population.<sup>101</sup>

Castries therefore viewed "color prejudice" as a destabilizing force rather than the palliative some of his contemporaries projected it to be. Castries rolled out his program discretely. He instructed his administrators in the Antilles to win the trust of Saint-Domingue's elites and persuade them to "temper" the biased principles that "degraded" free men of color in the colony.<sup>102</sup> Castries's initiative had at least some success. Lawmakers in Saint-Domingue refrained from passing explicitly discriminatory laws targeting people of color after 1783.<sup>103</sup>

Although he was cautious about applying egalitarian reforms to the military sphere, Castries instructed his governor in Saint-Domingue, Bellecombe, to "maintain, in all other circumstances, the equality that must prevail (*régner*) between citizens."<sup>104</sup> Fresh from the Indian Ocean, Bellecombe's record in Saint-Domingue suggests he brought some of the approach to racial issues he had adopted in Bourbon.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, Bellecombe's reputation in Bourbon may have been among the reasons

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<sup>101</sup> Dominique Rogers, "Raciser la société : un projet administratif pour une société domingoise complexe (1760-1791)," *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* 95, no. 2 (2009): 3. In that respect, his views were in line with the *Encyclopédie's* revised and expanded 1776 version of its earlier entry on "mulattos." That entry extolled free men of color for their military service, patriotic consumption of French products, and for their symbolic importance as living reminders for slaves of the social superiority bestowed by European parentage. Doris Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 217–18.

<sup>102</sup> Instructions from the Ministry to Saint-Domingue administrators, cited in Dominique Rogers, "De l'origine du préjugé de couleur en Haïti," *Outre-mers* 90, no. 340–341 (2003): 87.

<sup>103</sup> Rogers, "Raciser la société," 5.

<sup>104</sup> "Mémoire du Roy pour Servir d'instructions au Sr. De Bellecombe Maréchal de camps Gouverneur général de Saint Domingue [c. 1780-81]." ANOM, E25. (IREL, Vue 423).

<sup>105</sup> Debbasch, *Couleur et liberté. Le jeu de critère ethnique dans un ordre juridique esclavagiste*, 127–28.

Castries chose him to lead France's flagship colony, a position he would hold from 1781 to 1785. The Saint-Dominguan free-colored activist, Julien Raimond, wrote that Bellecombe "reprimanded" poor whites who attacked men of color.<sup>106</sup> Raimond was an indigo planter of one-quarter African descent. While in the metropole on business in the 1790s he became an advocate for expanding the rights of *gens de couleur libres* in Saint-Domingue. Bellecombe put him in touch with Castries. Raimond addressed a proposal to Castries requesting special status as "new whites" for people of his own social group: wealthy free people of color in Saint-Domingue who (they claimed) could prove they had no enslaved relatives. Although Castries was sympathetic, Raimond's proposal fell on deaf ears when Luzerne, who replaced Bellecombe as governor of Saint-Domingue in 1784, refused to implement it locally.<sup>107</sup>

Luzerne replaced Castries as Minister of the Navy in December 1787. He wrote his own set of Instructions to the governor he appointed to Saint-Domingue in 1788 in which he raised the possibility that free men could be admitted into the class of whites when the external signs of their origins had disappeared. "Perhaps it might be right, as has been suggested," he wrote, "to prohibit any research into the origin of individuals whose color would differ not at all, or hardly at all, from that of the [French] nation." Rather than accept Raimond's proposal for a contingent of honorary "new whites," who may have darker complexions but could provide genealogical "proof" that none of their ancestors had been slaves, Luzerne seemed more willing to extend the benefit of the doubt to those whose ancestors, through such extensive intermarriage with Europeans *looked* white, while not obliging them, as in the controversial case of Chapuiset, to undergo a humiliating probe into the slave status of their ancestors. That free heritage was now supposed to trump color as the main prerequisite for whiteness seemed lost on Luzerne. Either way, he clearly did not take his own

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<sup>106</sup> Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, 217–20.

<sup>107</sup> Garrigus, 217–20.

proposition too seriously because rather than making a decision himself, he punted the issue to the magistrates and notoriously biased “notables” of Saint-Domingue to debate.<sup>108</sup>

### **“Of Freeborn Race”: An Imperial Pronouncement on Race in Bourbon Island**

Bellecombe departed Saint-Domingue in 1785, retiring from the Navy to settle down on an estate near Montauban, France.<sup>109</sup> But his career in public service was not yet over. Because of his extensive experience in the Indian Ocean, Castries recruited him to serve as “chargé des affaires de l’Inde,” a kind of personal consultant on all matters related to the Navy’s East Indies policy.<sup>110</sup> It is likely that Bellecombe counseled Castries as he crafted the language of his Mascarenes race policy, which would include what amounted to the empire’s first official endorsement of Bourbon Island Creoles’ collective claims to whiteness. The statement appeared in a set of “Instructions,” which he announced in a May 1786 letter proclaiming the appointment of the last set of royal administrators dispatched to the Mascarenes before the Revolution.

With regard to how administrators should understand racial categories among free people in the Mascarenes, Castries’ “Instructions,” emphasized pragmatism and expediency over ideological orthodoxy.<sup>111</sup> In keeping with his plans for Saint-Domingue, Castries declared a new “objective” for

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<sup>108</sup> 1 August 1788, mémoire-instruction for Governor Du Chilleau. ANOM C<sup>9</sup>A160. Quoted in Jean Tarrade, “Is Slavery Reformable? Proposals of Colonial Administrators at the End of the Ancien Régime,” in *The Abolitions of Slavery: From Léger Félicité Sonthonax to Victor Schoelcher, 1793, 1794, 1848*, ed. Marcel Dorigny (Paris: Unesco Publishing, 2003), 105.

<sup>109</sup> In France Bellecombe entertained visitors on business from Bourbon eager to pay their respects to the former governor. Bellecombe remained a dedicated lobbyist for the interests of Bourbon Island’s elite and even looked after their children in the metropole. A prominent Bourbonnais créole (of exclusively European descent) wrote Bellecombe a letter of gratitude during a trip to France: “*Mon Général*, you are the father of this colony.” Letter from Henry Panon Desbassayns to Bellecombe, 15 October 1781, Bourbon. Reproduced in Henry Paulin Panon Desbassayns, *Petit journal des époques pour servir à ma mémoire: 1784-1786*, ed. Jean Barbier and Jean-Claude de Villèle (Saint-Denis, Réunion: Musée historique de la Villèle, 1991), 349.

<sup>110</sup> Letter from Bellecombe to Henry Panon, 8 February 1787. Cited in Panon Desbassayns, 24.

<sup>111</sup> The first mention of this document in the record, it seems, is in the letter of Castries to Souillac, No. 245, Versailles, 8 May 1786, in ANOM C<sup>4</sup>94, f. 221. The letter announces that d’Entrecasteux will command the king’s naval station at Port Louis and, by extension, all territory east of the Cape of Good Hope, and will be accompanied by a “Mémoire du Roi qui lui a été remis pour servir d’instructions aux quelles sa majesté vous charge de vous conformer en ce qui vous concernera. Je suis persuade que vous éviterez avec soin de vous écarter de l’Esprit de ses instructions.” 7 March 1777. “Mémoire du Roi, pour servir d’Instructions au Sieur Marquis de Bouillé, Maréchal de Camp, Gouverneur de la

administrators in the Indian Ocean islands: to “work ceaselessly to weaken prejudice against blacks and people of color.”<sup>112</sup> Castries adapted his section on “population” for the Mascarenes from a passage in a similar set of instructions for administrators in Martinique from 1777. However, where the Martinique version had counseled that “whatever distance they may be from their origin, [freemen of color] [must] always retain the stain of slavery, and are declared incapable of all public charges and functions,” Castries’s 1787 Instructions recommended a less aggressive posture. He reported happily that, in the Indian Ocean colonies, “prejudice is not as strong as it is in the occidental islands against those who are descended from ex-slaves and who are a great distance from their origin.”

Even though the Instructions, which would be published on the islands, lumped that acknowledgement into its section on “people of color,” Castries was explicit in his intentions to recognize as legitimate the traditional claims to whiteness of all Bourbon Island Creoles. “[As] the first inhabitants of Bourbon were fugitive Europeans from Madagascar...and the women they brought were Malagasy, but of freeborn race (*de race ingénue*), it does not seem appropriate to consider their descendants [as we consider] descendants of freed slaves in the sugar colonies [i.e. the Antilles].” “*Ingénue*” was a term from Roman law that Castries may have chosen to give his pronouncement an extra veneer of legitimacy.<sup>113</sup> For the first time, Versailles had established where the majority of Bourbon’s white subjects fit in the hierarchy of colonial populations.

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Martinique, et au Sieur Président de Tasher, Intendant de la même Colonie” [Signed by the King, and Sartine, Min. of the Navy]. “Mémoire sur les colonies française de l’Amérique,” in ANOM, F<sup>2C7</sup>, Carton 7 (1765-1790: Mémoires, toutes colonies), ff. 1-13.

<sup>112</sup> Undated draft form of the “Mémoire du Roi.” ANOM C<sup>477</sup>, f. 110 (marginalia in Castries’s handwriting).

<sup>113</sup> “Mémoire du Roi [pour] D’Entrecasteaux [et] Dupuy.” 9 March 1789. ANOM C<sup>477</sup>, f. 19. The final version, sent out in 1789, built on several previous drafts, found in the same *cote*. In one draft, beginning f. 68, next to the section on *gens de couleur*, in the margin is written in pencil, “il a été fait au ministre un rapport d’une lettre de M D’Entrecasteaux à ce Sujet...” It is possible that the minister (Luzerne) had gone back to review the original language of the instructions to help deal with the controversy over militia reform being reported in 1789 by d’Entrecasteaux. The line about the Bourbonnais créoles is in every draft. The earliest drafts were commented on by Castries and feature his handwriting in the margins (f. 75v).

What were the origins of Castries's pronouncement? By Castries's tenure, the issue of Bourbonnais whiteness had emerged as a potential problem at least--at least according to some of the reports that had made their way onto the minister's desk. Castries would be the first Crown minister to suggest an approach to dealing with Bourbon's Creole whites within the genre of official ministerial instructions. Based on those reports, and plausibly, the intelligence of his advisor Bellecombe, Castries would marshal elements of the founding myth of Bourbon's settlement in the mid-seventeenth century as proof that intermarriage had been a practical, if not desirable, solution to the circumstances that confronted Bourbon's earliest waves of male settlers--driven to Bourbon from the wreckage of France's ill-fated settlement in Madagascar.

The drama of that exodus, combined with the relative absence of European versus non-European women, were the "circumstances" that had "obliged" Bourbon's first male pioneers to settle for "black" marriage partners as a last resort; moreover, it was important to highlight, these were all "official" Catholic unions recognized by Church and State.<sup>114</sup>

One of the clearest articulations of that view can be found in an anonymous, undated essay entitled, "Reflections on the Asian Colonies," a copy of which survives in the archives of the Ministry of the Navy. The author of "Reflections on the Asian Colonies (*Reflexions sur les Colonies Aziatiques*)," claimed he had spent three months travelling throughout the Indian Ocean, including a stopover in Bourbon in 1767.<sup>115</sup> Context clues in the document suggest it was most likely written in

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<sup>114</sup> Bernardin de Saint-Pierre would write in 1791 that it had been the "lack of white women" that led Bourbon's first settlers to marry "negresses from Madagascar." Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Suite des Voeux*, originally published 1791. Copy in L. Aimé-Martin, ed., *Oeuvres Complètes de Jacques-Henri-Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Tome Onzième* (Imprimerie de L.-T. Cellot, 1818), 255–256.

<sup>115</sup> "Reflexions sur les Colonies Aziatiques. ANOM F3/48 (c. 1780)" (Unpublished Manuscript, n.d.), 8. An inventory file at ANOM erroneously attributes this document to Moreau de Saint-Méry himself. Most likely, the document was merely copied by the Martiniquan jurist; it survives in his vast collection of copies and original documents related to French colonialism, in the "Collection de Moreau de Saint-Méry." However, there is no evidence to suggest that Moreau de Saint-Méry himself ever travelled to the Indian Ocean, which the author of this document clearly had. The author claims to have spent a total of eight years in tropical "climes." The author had likely visited the East Indies during a brief stint as a young man in apprenticeship in the Navy. Such had been the career of Moreau's childhood friend, Louis Levassor de Latouche Tréville (1745-1804), pulled out of school at age thirteen to enter into navy service as a clerk. Vincent Huyghes-Belrose, "Moreau de Saint-Méry, Arpenteur Créole de Saint-Domingue," in *Moreau De Saint-Méry, Ou,*

the 1770s and that it was probably commissioned by the Ministry of the Navy to help advise the Crown as it took control of the civil administration of the Mascarenes from the French East India Company. In any case, the essay includes numerous recommendations for “the Government,” including on the subject of how best to deal with local populations.

According to “Reflections on the Asian Colonies,” the marriages that many Bourbon Island whites’ “[fore]fathers were forced to contract with black women...imprint on them a color that cannot be erased until several generations have passed.” Nevertheless, those unions could be excused based on a few basic factors. Firstly, these “mixed marriages,” as he put it, had occurred in the distant past out of necessity due to imbalanced sex ratios; secondly, they had been “legal marriages, avowed by laws of Church and State.”<sup>116</sup> Those “circumstances” had “obliged” officials “to turn a blind eye to [the] mixed marriages.”<sup>117</sup>

More subjectively, the men who made up the “nation” that those unions had generated exhibited many “commendable qualities.” For example, many were of “high birth” through their male ancestors.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, a higher percentage of Bourbon Island whites claimed noble status than in the metropole itself.<sup>119</sup> More importantly, they were useful to the empire. As had Governor Bellecombe, the author of “Reflections” praised Bourbon Island Creoles’ “national character,”

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*Les Ambiguïtés D'un Créole Des Lumières: Actes Du Colloque Organisé Par Les Archives Départementales De La Martinique Et La Société Des Amis Des Archives Et De La Recherche Sur Le Patrimoine Des Antilles, Avec Le Concours De L'Université Des Antilles Et De La Guyane, 10-11 Septembre 2004*, ed. Dominique Taffin (Fort-de-France [Martinique]: Société des amis des archives et de la recherche sur le patrimoine culturel des Antilles, 2006), 11.

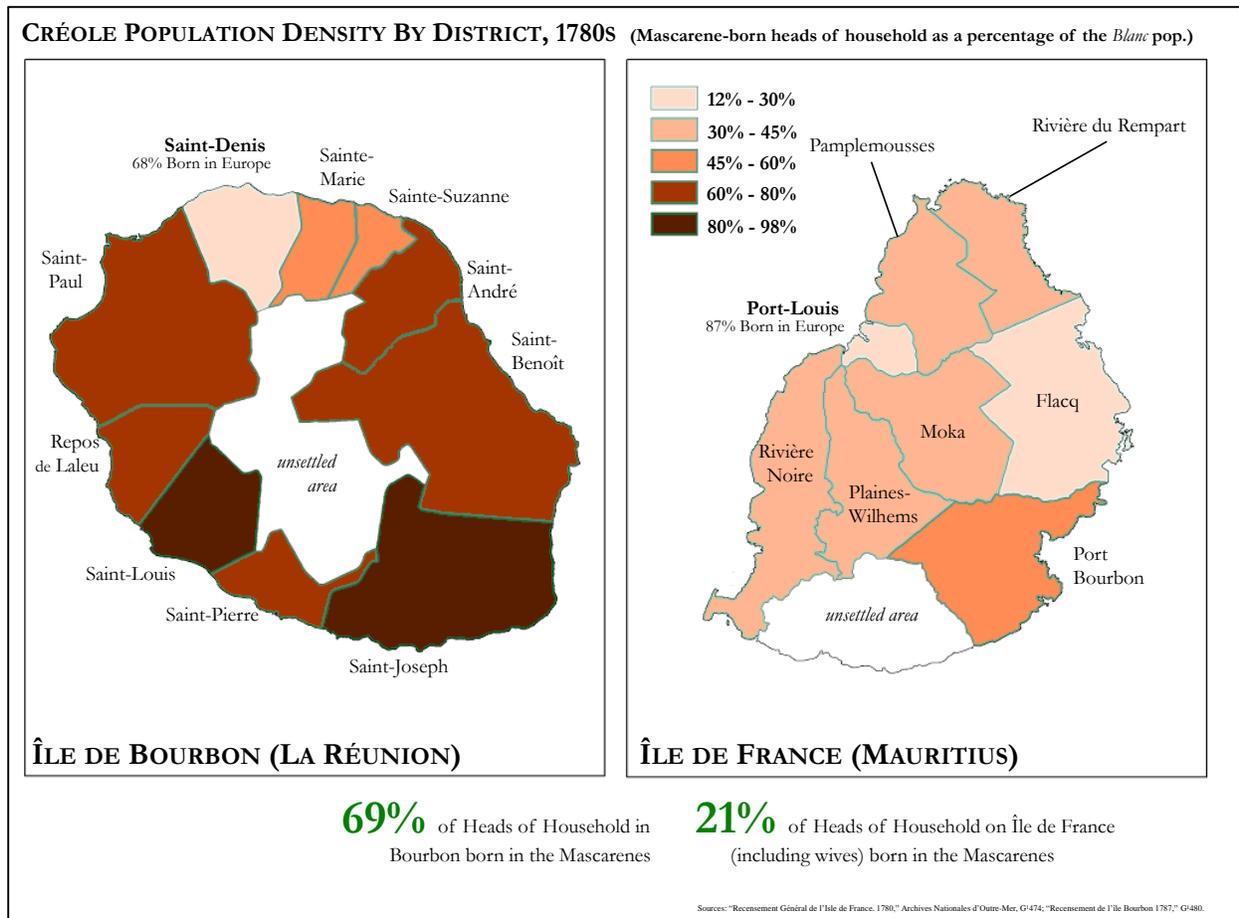
<sup>116</sup> The putative “legitimacy” of all of Bourbon’s first white generation was an essential debate point. Only at the end of the century did the legal concept of bastardy, which had developed in the colonies as a way to “stigmatize the offspring of sexual *mésalliances* between nobles and their servants,” emerge as a category to gloss all mixed-race children, whatever the marital status of their parents. Matthew Gerber, “Bastardy, Race, and Law in the Eighteenth-Century French Atlantic: The Evidence of Litigation,” *French Historical Studies* 36, no. 4 (September 21, 2013): 600.

<sup>117</sup> “Reflexions sur les Colonies Aziatiques,” 64.

<sup>118</sup> “Reflexions sur les Colonies Aziatiques,” 94. A British captain made a similar observation: “The Creoles [of Bourbon] enjoy the privileges of the second order of French nobility.” “Observations on the Isle of Bourbon, in 1763, by an Officer in the British Navy,” in Grant, Viscount de Vaux and Grant, *The History of Mauritius, or the Isle of France, and the Neighbouring Islands*, 166.

<sup>119</sup> Families marked as “nobles” in the 1776 census of Bourbon, formed a higher proportion of the total population (5%) than in the metropole (2%). Philippe Haudrère, *Les Français dans l’océan Indien (XVIIe-XIXe siècle)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014), 189.

which “contains all that is advantageous for the state”: bravery in battle, resilience in the face of hardship, and stoic endurance during lean times. “The general Fatherland of Frenchmen should adopt [Bourbon’s white Creoles] with joy.”<sup>120</sup> Implied in these statements, however, was the notion that Bourbon Island Creoles were *not* fully “Frenchmen.”



“Reflections” nonetheless argued that Bourbon Island Creoles deserved full legal equality with their white neighbors in the region—notably, with white colonists on Isle de France, who considered themselves racially superior.<sup>121</sup> “Reflections” included pages of notes comparing the

<sup>120</sup> “Reflexions sur les Colonies Aziatiques,” 91.

<sup>121</sup> The author employs the term “mixed marriages” (*les alliances mêlées*) rather than the derogatory *mésalliances*, leaving negative connotations attached to such unions out of his document. The word *mésalliance* was rare but not entirely foreign to Bourbon. “Mésalliance” was the term the Compagnie had used to chide the marriages between its employees and local “girls of mixed blood.” On top of that, continued “Reflexions,” Bourbon’s primogenitors faced daily threats to their survival from the inhospitable environment of the island (including its volcano. “Reflexions” continued to defend Bourbon with some of the familiar tropes found in Raynal’s series. Again, the author evoked the natural landscape of the

white populations of the two islands. On Bourbon, the “simplicity of morals [was] better preserved” as contacts with Europe and its supposedly corrupting influences had been historically less frequent. In contrast, Port Louis with its sailors, soldiers, and culture of “libertine” sexuality had debased the colonists of Isle de France. They hypocritically “sacrifice[d] [their] solid and legitimate families (*établissements*)” in favor of black mistresses and their mixed-race children, “the vile fruits of shameful libertinage,” while “deriding the worthy colonists” of Bourbon for their non-European heritage. However, “Reflections” did not fully condemn the racism of white colonists on Isle de France toward their counterparts on Bourbon. Rather, the document described “color prejudice” as regrettable but necessary for the state to uphold. Although color prejudice was “a revolting abuse that offends humanity,” the Government would be imprudent if it attempted to “tackle it head-on.”<sup>122</sup> It was “undeniable,” he claimed, that “in the souls of all white men everywhere there is a principle of superiority, and scorn for any mixed blood to whatever degree it may be.” For that reason, Versailles must always “admit a distinction between the two colors, and even between their nuances. It would be best to completely separate them.”<sup>123</sup> Here was an official justifying racial “separation” not on the basis of the supposed inferiority of nonwhite people, biological or cultural, nor for the sake of social control in a slave society, but in order to accommodate the prejudice of other colonial whites. The author of “Reflections” thus suggested that the Mascarenes, like the Antilles, had their own class of poor whites resentful of wealthy people of color, whom it was important to appease with racist legislation.

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place, whose added challenges, including mountainous terrains and an active volcano, made the “first *habitants*” of Bourbon more exemplary of grit and ingenuity than the pioneers of other French colonies. Despite the challenges, they had created a “colony as pleasant as it is useful.” Like Raynal, the author echoed the notion that early Bourbonnais society had benefited from its separation from “the rest of the universe [and its] vices.” The result was a “nation that the State cannot regard highly enough.” “Reflexions sur les Colonies Aziatiques,” 64, 91.

<sup>122</sup> “Reflexions sur les Colonies Aziatiques,” ff. 94-95.

<sup>123</sup> “Reflexions sur les Colonies Aziatiques,” 64. The author continued by alluding to stereotypes about “mulattos”: “It is almost generally known that mulattos, whether freeborn or born to slaves, have rather bad inclinations, and typically bring together the vices of both whites and blacks.”

How could a “complete separation” be effected in the Indian Ocean colonies, where populations had been mixing from the earliest days of settlement?<sup>124</sup> “Reflections” proposed a relocation scheme to “whiten” Isle de France. That island, to which France had first sent settlers in the 1720s, generations after the establishment of Bourbon’s charter generation, “had long maintained itself pure and without mixture.”<sup>125</sup> The “small amount of mixed blood that had slipped” into that colony’s white population had come from marriages to Bourbonnais women. Those individuals could be excised from the population and sent “back to Bourbon, whence they came,” and that island, already woefully blended, would become a kind of preserve for the mixed-race rejects of the region. Such individuals (or couples) were so few, he reasoned, that exiling them could be done relatively inexpensively and without “causing a stir on the island.”<sup>126</sup> At the very least, the

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<sup>124</sup> “Reflections” conceded that it was too late to hope for now, but any future state-sponsored settlement projects in the Indian Ocean must feature strict racial separation. That included Madagascar, where, even if the Crown chose to outlaw slavery, “the difference of color must forever prohibit too intimate a relationship.” “Reflexions sur les Colonies Aziatiques,” 100.

<sup>125</sup> “Reflexions sur les Colonies Aziatiques,” 64. The author also suggested that to deal with overpopulation on Bourbon itself, administrators should consider sending impoverished *créoles* to help colonize Madagascar, as they were enterprising, good farmers, and acclimatized. “Reflexions sur les Colonies Aziatiques,” 102.

<sup>126</sup> It is impossible to know exactly which families the author had in mind, but it would probably have included some of the families of the forty-eight Bourbon-born individuals recorded in the Isle de France census of 1780 and clustered principally in the capital and in the district fittingly named “Rivière des Créoles.” “Recensement Général de l’Isle de France, 1780.” ANOM G1474. In 1788, among the 2,453 permanent white residents of the city of Port Louis, only thirty adults were recorded as born on Bourbon (birthplaces of children were usually not given). All but four were women—most married or formerly married to European men. They represented only six percent of adult white women who resided permanently in the city. Collectively, the natives of Bourbon domiciled in Port Louis were spread across households comprising 105 free men, women, and children in total—or 4.3 per cent of the permanent white population. Census for 1788, Quartier du Port Louis,” Isle de France, National Archives of Mauritius KK45 (thanks to Kit Heintzman, who shared her digital copy). There are hints in the Mauritian archival record that some individuals who may have been recognized as white on Bourbon were identified as “colored” once on Isle de France. For example, a woman identified as “Clain (Marie) femme de couleur” is listed on the “Index des Journaux de Police,” 22 Nivôse an 11 [12 January 1803]. National Archives of Mauritius (hereafter, NAM) Z/2B/1, p. 42. The Clains were a prominent white family on Réunion. In separate correspondence between the Comité de Sûreté publique of Isle de France and its Réunion counterpart a man classified as white on Réunion, René Maillot, was referred to as one of a group of “citoyens de couleur de votre isle.” Comité de Sûreté publique de l’Isle de France to the Comité de Sûreté publique de l’Isle de la Réunion. 24 October 1797. ADR L63. The author of “Reflections on the Asian Colonies” was not alone in proposing radical social engineering solutions to ensure racial separation in the French empire. Several writers in the 1770s proposed similarly dystopian schemes for Saint-Domingue in order to regulate the interracial sexuality of colonial society. Rather than the state-orchestrated removal proposed in “Reflexions sur les Colonies Aziatiques,” Hilliard d’Auberteuil, in particular, proposed the “large-scale selective breeding of humans,” to shore up and bolster three truly distinct racial categories (white, black, and yellow), which would correspond to their position in society. William Max Nelson, “Making Men: Enlightenment Ideas of Racial Engineering,” *The American Historical Review* 115, no. 5 (December 1, 2010): 1364–94. The forced removal he recommended was not dissimilar from other proposals submitted to the Ministry to reform the management of the Indian Ocean colonies as they passed from Company to Crown. Steered

plan that had been proposed to relocate some poor Bourbon farmers to Isle de France to help develop the island's underserved agricultural sector should be cancelled because most of those who would be sent were simply too dark-skinned to be taken seriously as equals on Isle de France. Their "nuance (dark skin tone)" took nothing "away from their moral qualities" but gave even "the lowliest European the temptation, if not the right, to think himself superior to the most distinguished of mixed-blooded men."<sup>127</sup>

Even as "Reflections" counseled accommodating prejudice on Isle de France, it advocated manipulating Bourbon Islanders through flattery. "The Creole of Bourbon is...as sensitive to despotism as to indifference." Once the Government "gains his confidence, he is capable of the greatest of things [and] worthy of the greatest attention...[but] it is as dangerous to offend him through neglect as it is to indispose him by too severe an administration."<sup>128</sup> Consequently, the author of "Reflections" specifically suggested the same approach as that recommended by the Royal Administrators of Bourbon in their 1778 letter to Father Davelu. "It would be a base investigation, and unworthy of the attention of honest people," he wrote, to investigate the family trees of Bourbon's oldest white families. "However impure (*vicioux*) the origins [of the colony] may have been, they [can be] thoroughly erased by the passage of several generations."<sup>129</sup>

However, by the Crown's own reasoning, it was not enough to excuse the mixed marriages in the past because of "necessity" if those marriages had been contracted with enslaved or formerly

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migration proposals to send Germans, *Canadiens*, and Acadians to farm uncultivated land in Isle de France were submitted. "Mémoire instructif pour les isles de France et de Bourbon," attached in Letter of le Chevalier de Ternay to Min. of the Navy, Isle de France, 17 July 1775. ANOM 23DFC 16 (Mémoires), No 102. The proposal to send Acadians to Isle de France was seriously considered. See Christopher Hodson, *The Acadian Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5, 183, 192. One writer in the Mascarenes speculated about introducing a "Chinese population" to Madagascar, where, "mixing with Malagasy women they could propagate." Afterwards, such couples could be allowed to settle lands sold to them at discount on Isle de France. The stopover in Madagascar was necessary because there were "too few free women" to allow the Chinese men to settle on Isle de France first. Anonymous, c. 1789, "Observations sur le Mémoire du Roi, pour servir d'instructions aux Sieurs d'Entrecasteaux et du Puy," ANOM C<sup>477</sup>.

<sup>127</sup> "Reflexions sur les Colonies Aziatiques," 94.

<sup>128</sup> "Reflexions sur les Colonies Aziatiques," 96.

<sup>129</sup> "Reflexions sur les Colonies Aziatiques," 94.

enslaved parties. The author of “Reflections” had not broached the subject of whether the “black” foremothers of Bourbon Island Creoles had been free or enslaved. Most other reports that made their way to the Ministry were mum on that subject as well. A memorandum from the late 1780s by the man Bellecombe had succeeded as governor of Bourbon seemed unable to answer the minister’s questions about the early history of the colony: “What I know of the history of the Isle de Bourbon can be reduced to little: the debris of the colony of Fort-Dauphin arrived around the year 1670 to augment the small number of inhabitants that existed then in Bourbon. Those were the first [male] colonists; and most of the first wives were Indian or Malagasy Negresses.”<sup>130</sup> A second report, written in 1785 by Jean-Baptiste Larabit, a prosecutor for the king, was similarly vague on the precise status of those women: “The first *habitants* were Frenchmen who fled here from Madagascar after the destruction by the Natives of the country of an original establishment which the [French] nation had on that island in the last century...The first [male] inhabitants, deprived of women, took them for the most part from India and Madagascar[.] It was [a] necessity.”<sup>131</sup> One much earlier report, however, from 1686, by a Company official who visited Bourbon, was unequivocal: “These unfortunates demanded women [from Europe], most of them having been forced to marry their Negress slaves.”<sup>132</sup> The reports were clear that the women had been black (“*Négresses*”) but had they been enslaved? Could the Ministry advance a generalized understanding of Malagasy or South Asian peoples as incapable of being legitimately enslaved, as it had done with Native Americas?

South Asians had been enslaved across all of France’s enclaves in the Indian Ocean for generations (and would continue to be on Réunion until 1848). Nevertheless, there was precedent for the interpretation that South Asians were not covered by the king’s laws regarding slavery and

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<sup>130</sup> Martin Adrien Bellier, “Mémoire sur les differents quartiers du Vent de l’Isle Bourbon,” (not dated, probably the late 1780s), ANOM F<sup>31</sup>, ff. 28-29. Martin Adrien Bellier served as governor of Bourbon from March to November 1767.

<sup>131</sup> Jean-Baptiste Larabit, ancien procureur du Roy, “Notes sur L’Isle de Bourbon,” 1785, ANOM F<sup>31</sup>, ff. 105-115.

<sup>132</sup> “Ces Miserables demandoit des femmes la plus part aiant Esté Contraint depouser des negresses leur Exclaves.” Chevalier de Ricous, Saint-Germain, 17 December 1686. ANOM C<sup>31</sup>, f. 54.

therefore not legitimately enslavable. In 1759, the Parlement of Paris, France’s highest court, had ruled in favor of a slave living in France who sued for his freedom. The lawyers representing Francisque, “of the Nation of India,” had argued that their client had never been legitimately enslaved in the first place because “laws authoriz[ing] slavery for blacks [could not] be applied to Indians serving in countries other than America.” Moreover, Francisque was a practicing Catholic (necessary for naturalization in the realm) and, despite his “color,” his facial features made him “look more European than many Europeans.”<sup>133</sup> Natives of Madagascar had likewise constituted a large proportion of the enslaved population on Bourbon since the colony’s founding. Some seventeenth-century writings documenting the French experience on the island proclaimed a difference between lighter-skinned elites who claimed superiority over darker-skinned slaves, as discussed in chapter 1. Bellecombe may even have briefed Castries at length about the legends that circulated on Bourbon of elite Malagasy great-grandmothers. There was no documentary proof,

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<sup>133</sup> “Mémoire signifié pour le nommé Francisque, Indien de nation, néophyte de l’Eglise Romain, contre le Sieur Allain-François-Ignace Brignon, se disant Ecuyer, Appellant.” Edited and translated by Sue Peabody, in Sue Peabody and Keila Grinberg, eds., *Slavery, Freedom, and the Law in the Atlantic World: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2007), 45–51. Francisque’s lawyers published their arguments in pamphlets distributed to the population of Paris with the intention of swaying popular opinion in their favor. Unlike all other publications in France, such pamphlets were not subject to royal censorship. The Parlement of Paris was most important and influential of the provincial appellate courts of Old Regime France. The 1759 case involving Francisque marked the first and last time the Parlement would rule on the status of slaves in France. The Parlement heard the case on appeal, after the lower Admiralty Court had ruled in favor of Francisque, ordering his master, Mr. Brignon, to pay him 800 livres for eight years’ back wages, plus 200 livres in interest and damages for his incarceration during the trial. The Parlement of Paris ruled in favor of Francisque’s freedom, but because French judges never publicly stated the rationales for their decisions, we cannot know on what grounds Francisque was ruled free. His victory seems to have had an impact on subsequent freedom suits in other venues. The number of slaves suing for their freedom in the Paris Admiralty Court increased dramatically, and all of them won their cases. Francisque’s legal victory did not end the enslavement of Indians. When the 1777 “Police des Noirs” legislation compelled all “blacks, mulattos, and people of color” living in the metropole to declare themselves, eleven percent of those who did so hailed from the Indian Ocean colonies, and many were slaves of Indian descent. Boulle, “Les non-Blancs de l’océan Indien en France.” In 1793, French Civil Commissioner Lescallier suppressed the sale of persons “of any Asian nation or Indian caste” in French enclaves in India based in part on the justification that “from time immemorial, Indians have never been used as slaves in our Western colonies [i.e. those of the Americas] and therefore this trade was never authorized by French Law.” L’adjoind de la 5eme Division de la Marine to Citoyen Lescallier, Paris, 13 March 1793, ANOM B224, f. 33. South Asians continued to be enslaved on French Réunion until the abolition of slavery in 1848. For more on French India and French slave trading in the Indian Ocean, see Danna Agmon, *A Colonial Affair: Commerce, Conversion, and Scandal in French India* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017); Peabody, *Madeleine’s Children: Family, Freedom, Secrets, and Lies in France’s Indian Ocean Colonies*; Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500-1850*.

however, that all of the Malagasy women who married male settlers on Bourbon hailed from the former caste.

Apparently, that mattered little for Castries. He went directly to the founding myths of Bourbon to derive his justification for what amounted to the first public acknowledgement and of the non-European roots of Bourbon Island Creoles. Nevertheless, Castries's statement about the origins of Bourbon Island Creoles was not an order but a suggestion. The minister left it up to his administrators' "discretion to allow (*apprécier*) conventions that seem purely local." Moreover, unlike previous decrees issued for the Antilles, the Instructions sent to the Mascarenes did not require anyone to produce documentary proof of their descent in order to maintain access to whiteness and its prerogatives. Not everyone on Bourbon would have appreciated Castries's clarification: it would not have satisfied hardliners like those who had registered their disapproval of Bellecombe's accommodation of mixed-ancestry Creoles, and it is plausible that it might have wounded the sensibilities of Creoles anxious about any evocation of their non-European origins--or those few who claimed "purity" of origin, now apparently mixed in with those who could not. Yet given the severe and sweeping declarations of his predecessors, Castries's was diplomatic and restrained, taking advantage of the ambiguities opened up by decades of competing imperial pronouncements. In disparaging the Antilles' mixed-race populations, however, the Instructions further entrenched the association between mainland African origins and servile status. Tellingly, even the decidedly more rigid Luzerne, who took over the helm of the Ministry in 1787, did not balk. He affixed his signature to the document and dispatched it to the Indian Ocean colonies without revision.

## **Conclusion**

Examining the making of race in the French empire through the prism of Bourbon Island demonstrates that imperial policy could prove remarkably supple. Despite the persistent notion of a

hyper-centralized imperial apparatus in the French case, imperial administrators proved adept at “selectively accommodating difference” among subject populations, to borrow the turn-of-phrase coined by Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper.<sup>134</sup> Consequently, the elaborate discourses generated by Versailles to justify their decisions about race in the empire should not always be understood as statements of a hard-and-fast ideology; often they were advanced *post facto* to defend what were usually more pragmatic approaches to social, political, and economic dynamics “on the ground.”

A set of strategic considerations served to justify the relatively lenient attitudes of Ancien Régime administrators toward the claims to whiteness of Bourbon Island’s Creoles of mixed ancestry, just as political considerations justified stricter attitudes in the French Caribbean. The Government sought the best solution for maintaining social stability in both spheres of its empire, and for keeping tax revenue flowing into the metropole. In the Antilles, this meant restoring the loyalty of a restive white population by exacerbating racial grievance. On Bourbon Island, it meant appeasing a population that was valuable to the empire in providing men (soldiers in the Indian Ocean theaters of France’s wars with Britain) and material (farms made the site a fruitful supply depot). Because tensions between whites with non-European backgrounds and those who claimed exclusive European ancestry were less intense there than in the Caribbean, and because the former group far surpassed the latter, colonial officials approached the situation on Bourbon differently.

By the 1780s, it was beginning to seem to some in the Ministry of the Navy that Bourbon offered the better model for the empire going forward. The gradual relaxation of racial restrictions across the empire might have continued beyond the 1780s, but the French Revolution interrupted that process. In the end, the reforms may have been too little, too late. In the Caribbean, the scars

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<sup>134</sup> Burbank and Cooper have attributed much of the endurance of empires as political structures in world history to such calculated concessions, smoothing out some hierarchies even as they established new inequalities. Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 5.

remained deep among free people of color. When the divisions imperial lawmakers had fomented ignited into a civil war between free men of color and their white neighbors—a war that would eventually terminate in Haitian Independence and the loss of France’s most valuable colony—observers in the metropole would look back on the empire’s divisive racial policy as a grievous error.<sup>135</sup>

On Bourbon, too, a crisis was brewing. Throughout most of the Ancien Régime, local administrators had insisted on *not* enforcing a strict color line. They continued to pursue that approach even as the claims to whiteness of many Bourbon Island Creoles seemed increasingly precarious within the framework of a fast-racializing empire. Their decision largely went unchallenged. But administrators would face a threat in 1789, just before the Revolution, when a crisis over a plan to formally segregate the militia into white and nonwhite units conjured anxieties about the color line that they had preferred not to address. Those events would test whether the Ancien Régime’s accommodation of local systems of racial differentiation would prove a durable solution or only a temporary fix.

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<sup>135</sup> Burnard and Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine*, 191.