



2016

## The Language of Race in Revolutionary France and Saint-Domingue, 1789-1792

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Digital Object Identifier: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13023/ETD.2016.094>

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THE LANGUAGE OF RACE IN REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE AND SAINT-  
DOMINGUE, 1789-1792

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Jeffery Lewis Stanley

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Jeremy D. Popkin, Professor of History

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2016

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### THE LANGUAGE OF RACE IN REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE AND SAINT-DOMINGUE, 1789-1792

This project studies the historical development of racist language during the French Revolution as politicians, free people of color, and colonial whites debated the political status of France's free people of color population. It examines the negotiation of a racist language that bolstered colonial racial hierarchies with an egalitarian language that sought to level the corporate structures of the Old Regime. I look especially at the ways that language served as a management device to articulate and legitimize new relationships of power in the political culture of the French Revolution. I connect developments in France to the colonies by showing how free men of color were able to impose their own egalitarian, color-blind language on colonial public discourse through armed force and by leveraging the white population's need for their support after the August 1791 slave insurrection in Saint-Domingue. I also highlight how whites in the colony attempted to maintain racist power structures while publicly adopting the revolutionary language of race. I argue that a disavowal of race in public discourse occurred after the French government enfranchised free men of color in 1792 that attempted to reconcile colonial power structures with republican values. However, the continuation of racial violence in Saint-Domingue, culminating in the destruction of Cap Français on June 20, 1793, indicate the limits of revolutionary idealism and the persistence of a racialized worldview despite the revolutionary attempt to transform colonial society by deracializing the public sphere.

**KEYWORDS:** Language, Race, French Revolution, Haitian Revolution, Saint-Domingue, Free People of Color

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THE LANGUAGE OF RACE IN REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE AND SAINT-  
DOMINGUE, 1789-1792

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To my parents, Walker and Linda Stanley, and my grandparents, Darrell and Ellen Long

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Professor Jeremy Popkin for his incredible mentorship over many years. Without his advice on historical problems and avenues of research, his remarkable insights into the history of the French and Haitian Revolutions, and his willingness to share his time and knowledge, this project would not have been possible. It has truly been a pleasure to work with such a passionate and dedicated scholar. I will always be grateful for his friendship. I would also like to thank Dr. Erik Myrup, Dr. Phil Harling, and Dr. Jacqueline Couti for taking the time to serve on my committee and for their helpful criticisms and advice throughout the process. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the American Philosophical Society for its generous support of this project through a Library Resident Research Fellowship. The APS was home for a wonderful summer of research.

I could not have completed this project without the support of my friends and family. In the History Department, I owe acknowledgment to Dr. Eric Christianson and Dr. John Davis for years of friendship that helped me deal with the stress of graduate school. I would also like to thank two of my very best friends, Emily and Tyler Crews, for their encouragement and support over the years. Finally, I wish to thank my family, especially my parents, Walker and Linda, for their unwavering support of all my endeavors.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments . . . . .iii

Chapter One: Introduction . . . . .1

Chapter Two: The Language of Race during the Old Regime . . . . .23

Chapter Three: The French Revolution and the Language of Race from 1789 to the  
May 15, 1791 Law . . . . .76

Chapter Four: Competing Languages of Race in France and Saint-Domingue from  
May-September 1791 . . . . .121

Chapter Five: The Disavowal of Race in France and Saint-Domingue, 1791-1792 . . . 157

Chapter Six: Conclusion . . . . .209

Bibliography . . . . .222

Vita . . . . .234



## Chapter One: Introduction

The French Revolution's universalistic expressions in favor of human equality raised many questions in the French colonies about the nature of race and citizenship, and Saint-Domingue's social organization premised on racial discrimination became an object of trans-Atlantic political debate. In debates over political rights, free people of color in Saint-Domingue were often evoked as a coherent political group challenging white supremacy in the colony. The language used to refer to free people of color in public papers gave conceptual unity to the group and positioned free people of color in the field of meanings through which participants in the public sphere made sense of the political landscape and the revolutionary situation.<sup>1</sup> Institutions of the public sphere, such as the pamphlet and periodical press, and the halls of elected assemblies served as the terrain where this language was negotiated and meanings were created. By examining the language of race in public discourse, this study demonstrates how ideas of race changed over time through interaction with revolutionary rhetoric, leading to new policies and ideas about how to synthesize egalitarianism and imperialism.<sup>2</sup> It will demonstrate that despite the fact that the egalitarianism of the French Revolution resulted in a disavowal of race as a legitimate aspect of public discourse, racist thinking persisted through a color-blind language of race. Thus, this study has implications for the

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<sup>1</sup> My framework for interpreting how language functioned in the public sphere during the French Revolution is informed by Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989) and Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> My analysis of the evolution of revolutionary racist language in response to the attempt to synthesize republican ideals and colonial power structures is influenced by and adds to Laurent Dubois' discussion of "republican racism" in *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hills, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

modern-day French struggle with racism, where the existence of difference is denied under the logic of French republicanism, yet remains part of society.

I focus on the period from 1789-1792 because it is a critical moment in the history of race relations in France and Saint-Domingue. In August 1789, French revolutionaries issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which espoused the principle of equality in universal terms. The Revolution's embrace of the universality of natural rights inspired a movement among free people of color to gain political equality with whites, which culminated in the French Legislative Assembly's April 4, 1792 law granting political rights to all free people of color who met the same qualifications set for whites. The April 4 law represents a significant moment in European and Atlantic World history, as it marked the first time that a European colonial power had fully enfranchised and legally recognized the equality of a group with African ancestry. Furthermore, the April 4 law changed the political dynamic in Saint-Domingue and opened up a new chapter that would lead ultimately to Haitian independence in 1804 as a result of the law's failure to create a unified bloc of citizens loyal to France.

Saint-Domingue had the largest and wealthiest free population of color in the Americas, and at the end of the eighteenth century, it was the most valuable possession of the French empire, as its sugar production accounted for roughly half of Europe's supply. Of course, the prosperity that Saint-Domingue brought to France was fueled by an incredibly exploitive plantation system utilizing more than 500,000 slave laborers. The French settlement of the Caribbean, though, had far more modest beginnings. It began in 1625 on the island of Saint-Christophe, and, in 1635, colonists of the French West Indies Company settled the islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe. These early colonial

ventures utilized French indentured servant labor to clear the land and plant, primarily, tobacco. From about 1650, the French began to encourage settlement of the western third of the Spanish island of Hispaniola. Although abandoned by the Spanish, this mountainous terrain was home to an assortment of *boucaniers* who ranched cattle and sold leather and smoked jerky to passing ships, pirates who preyed on local shipping or smuggled goods, and a small population of *habitants* attempting to farm the land.<sup>3</sup>

The rise of tobacco in the British Virginia colony put pressure on the Caribbean market and encouraged a transition to sugar cultivation in the French Antilles. Sugar cultivation was much more labor intensive than tobacco cultivation, so the transition to sugar resulted in a surge in African slave labor. The transition from indentured labor to slave labor and the rise of large sugar estates over small tobacco farms produced extreme demographic shifts in Martinique and Guadeloupe and led many French colonists to settle in the still fledgling outpost of French Saint-Domingue where land was more available. With increasing settlement in Saint-Domingue, France sought to impose more formal control over the colony. Peace with Spain in 1697 led to formal recognition of French claims to Saint-Domingue, and it encouraged French policing of piracy that it had previously tacitly endorsed. However, Saint-Domingue had already been transitioning from a bastion for pirates for decades.<sup>4</sup> In a pattern similar to other Caribbean colonies, Saint-Domingue began to develop a planter class in the latter half of the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> In 1680, the number of French colonists doubled the number of African slaves

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<sup>3</sup> John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 22-24.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-28.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1972).

in Saint-Domingue (4,336 to 2,102), but, by 1713, African slaves outnumbered French colonists nearly five to one (24,156 to 5,648).<sup>6</sup> By 1789, the number of slaves to free people would reach a ratio of roughly eight to one. This demographic imbalance between slave and free and the dearth of free women in the colony encouraged white colonists to engage in long-term sexual relationships with enslaved women, resulting in the emergence of a free population of color early in Saint-Domingue's history as some whites manumitted their partners and the children produced with them. However, in these master-slave relationships, only a small percentage of women and their children were ever manumitted and the rest remained in slavery.<sup>7</sup>

Although colonial legislation sought especially after 1763 to turn free people of color into an intermediary caste, the group was far from monolithic. There existed dramatic regional, economic, social, and gender differences that undermined a sense of racial solidarity within the free colored population. The economic roles and demographic breakdown of free people of color varied, for instance, whether one examines it in a rural or urban context. While extended family units tended to predominate in the countryside, free people of color in cities were primarily young and childless.<sup>8</sup> A spirit of entrepreneurship reigned among this urban group of free people of color, and many of them traded in real estate or were involved in commerce. Vincent Ogé, the leader of an uprising of free men of color in October 1790, is a notable example of a free person of color who became a wealthy merchant in Cap Français, the principal commercial port in

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<sup>6</sup> Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>8</sup> Stewart R. King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-Revolutionary Saint-Domingue* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 50.

the colony.<sup>9</sup> Many free people of color were small shopkeepers and artisans, filling roles in the urban economy that whites looked to avoid.

Women formed the majority of the urban free population of color. Prostitution was a prominent (and stereotypical) area of economic activity for free women of color, but it was by no means an exclusive one.<sup>10</sup> Free women of color served as household managers for wealthy urban dwellers and in some cases ran their own businesses as well.<sup>11</sup> It was common for widows to invest in urban real estate, and so free women of color appear on notarial records as owners, renters, and subletters.<sup>12</sup> Free women of color also bought and sold slaves for profit and for use in their own entrepreneurial ventures.<sup>13</sup> Free people of color, thus, filled a wide range of roles in the urban economy, ranging from housekeepers, small merchants, peddlers, artisans, slave traders, commercial agents, and landlords.

In the countryside, free people of color were predominantly plantation owners and small farmers. Historian Stewart King estimates that free people of color owned 30 percent of slaves in Saint-Domingue.<sup>14</sup> The stereotype surrounding free colored wealth in the colonial period asserted that free people of color obtained their land and slaves from their white fathers. While access to inheritance from whites certainly gave some free people of color an advantage, the research of historian John Garrigus has shown that many free colored planters made strategic use of family alliances through marriage to

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 152.

<sup>10</sup> David Geggus, "Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint-Domingue" in *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 270.

<sup>11</sup> Susan M. Socolow, "Economic Roles of the Free Women of Color of Cap Français" in *More than Chattel*, 281-282.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 283.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 285.

<sup>14</sup> King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 84.

increase their holdings and often revitalized property abandoned by whites through their own initiative and investment.<sup>15</sup> Thus, we cannot say that the free colored planter class owed its wealth and status entirely to gifts from wealthy white fathers. In comparison to the wealthiest white sugar magnates, free colored planters had access to the less desirable properties (outside of the fertile North Plain and Cul-de-Sac regions) and typically owned fewer slaves. For these reasons, free people of color were driven to the cultivation of coffee and indigo more often than sugar. Coffee and indigo could thrive in the cheaper hillside land and could be worked by a smaller labor force. The free colored planter class also tended to predominate in the more isolated South Province, where access to the slave trade and other commercial networks was more difficult and smuggling was the lifeblood of the region.

Garrigus has shown that prior to the 1760s the wealthiest members of the free population of color were accepted into white society, but after 1763 a series of discriminatory laws in Saint-Domingue sought to form a rigid color line in colonial society.<sup>16</sup> No longer would membership to the colonial elite be based on economic markers of status rather culturally defined racial factors would be determinant. Despite the hard line drawn by colonial laws, historian Dominique Rogers has demonstrated that in the North Province free people of color invested in social markers of status to “whiten” themselves and achieved a degree of integration.<sup>17</sup> The aspiration of wealthy free people of color to join “white society” speaks to the divisions between people with mixed European and African ancestry and free blacks. The research of French historian Gérard

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<sup>15</sup> Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 66.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 141-44.

<sup>17</sup> Dominique Rogers, “On the Road to Citizenship” in *The World of the Haitian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 65-72.

Barthelemy found a lack of racial solidarity among the free population of color as a whole. Free people of mixed European and African ancestry often sought to socialize amongst themselves and with whites rather than free blacks, and there existed a certain level of discrimination among people of color toward free blacks, who were not regarded as part of the same social class.<sup>18</sup>

While the Code Noir of 1685 stipulated that all free people in the colonies (whether of European or of African descent) had equal rights, growing anxieties after 1763 about the emergence of a distinct Creole identity in Saint-Domingue led to the institution of a segregationist legal order meant to secure white supremacy in the social and political arenas in an effort to unite white colonists to France. Prior to the French Revolution, Julien Raimond, a wealthy free colored planter from Saint-Domingue, petitioned the colonial ministry to reform the segregationist system, and while the king's minister seemed sympathetic to Raimond's argument, no significant steps were taken in favor of free people of color.<sup>19</sup> The revolutionary convulsion of 1789 and the French National Assembly's subsequent endorsement of the universality of natural rights gave free people of color their best hope yet of gaining social and political equality with whites.

Colonial free men of color in Paris when the revolution began organized quickly to engage in revolutionary politics. Although the Amis des Noirs, an antislavery pressure group, had been formed in 1788, free men of color did not immediately seek to cooperate

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<sup>18</sup> Gérard Barthelemy, "Spécificité, Idéologie et Rôle des Noirs Libres pendant la Période de l'indépendance d'Haiti" in *La Révolution française et Haiti*, Michael Hector, ed. (Port-au-Prince: Editions H. Deschamps), 171-73.

<sup>19</sup> Garrigus, "Opportunist or Patriot? Julien Raimond (1744-1801) and the Haitian Revolution" *Slavery and Abolition* Vol. 28, No. 1 (April 2007), 5.

with the group.<sup>20</sup> The wealthy men of color made a living from the institution of slavery, and they were in no hurry to join an organization whose aim was to abolish slavery. At first, free men of color, organized under the name Colons Américains, reached out to the Club Massiac, a political club organized by French absentee planters. Free people of color saw themselves as the natural allies of the elite white slave owners of Saint-Domingue. The Club Massiac, however, spurned the overtures of the Colons Américains. Julien Raimond then reached out to the Amis des Noirs to convince them to work toward securing political recognition for free people of color rather than the abolition of slavery. Although the Colons Américains in concert with the Amis des Noirs received a sympathetic hearing from the National Assembly in October 1789, the Club Massiac was able to successfully argue that racial prejudice against an intermediary caste was necessary to maintain slavery. For the first few years after 1789, the French government remained convinced by lobbyists for the white planters that any change to the colonial social order premised on white supremacy would spell the certain ruin of France's most valuable overseas possession.

However, public opinion turned against the white planter lobby in response to the brutal execution of Vincent Ogé in Le Cap after his October 1790 movement to secure political rights, and the French assembly subsequently granted political rights to free men of color born to free parents on May 15, 1791. In effect, this law enfranchised only a limited number of the total free population of color; nevertheless, whites in the colony resisted the law bitterly, resulting in a civil war between men of color emboldened and

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<sup>20</sup> Jeremy Popkin, "Saint-Domingue, Slavery, and the Origins of the French Revolution" in *From Deficit to Deluge: The Origins of the French Revolution*, Thomas E. Kaiser and Dale K. Van Kley eds. (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 223.



inspired by the new law and whites fighting to uphold the colonial order of white supremacy. In the midst of the civil war between the colony's free population, a slave insurrection erupted in the cane fields of the North Province surrounding Cap Français. With a slave revolt raging in the North Province and whites and free people of color fighting in the West Province, the French Legislative Assembly issued the momentous April 4, 1792 law granting full citizenship to all free people of color to fulfill the promise of the Revolution's ideals and to hopefully bring an end to the disastrous civil war among the free population over equality. Hostility between whites and free people of color continued despite the April 4 law and France's dispatch of a special commission, headed by Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Étienne Polverel, to enforce the law. The continued resistance by colonial whites to equality for people of color led to an insurrection against Sonthonax and Polverel, which prompted their decision to abolish slavery in Saint-Domingue as a pragmatic maneuver to create a loyal fighting force against whites who refused to accept French authority.

Thus, the years from 1789-1792 are an extremely important period for the study of race relations in France and Saint-Domingue due to the complex intersection of the August 1791 slave insurrection, the movement of free people of color for political equality, and white resistance to revolutionary authority in the colony. During this period, notions of race and citizenship were constantly changing in response to events in France and in the colonies. France eventually came to see free people of color as the true citizens in Saint-Domingue given their embrace of revolutionary values and the whites' rejection of those principles.

As cultural constructions, racial categories are unstable and in need of definition in order to provide any meaning for a society, and language was the primary symbolic system through which racial categories were given meaning for revolutionary French society. The racial categories constructed in Saint-Domingue and France over the course of the eighteenth-century had no objective reality outside of the reality created through their invocation via symbolic systems. In this sense, the articulation of systems of meaning that positioned groups in relation to one another based on socially constructed racial categories was an attempt to create systems of power that protected white supremacy and cast the claims of free people of color to political power as illegitimate. The debates over the political rights of free people of color were an important arena for the negotiation of power by redefining racial categories and making support for racial equality part of the acceptable public discourse on race and citizenship.

My analysis is informed by theoretical frameworks that emerged from the “linguistic turn” in cultural history. Philosopher J.L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* (1955) is an important theoretical predecessor to this turn in historical scholarship. Austin explored the power of language and how words can function to constitute action in a social context. Victor Klemperer’s *The Language of the Third Reich* (1947), based on the diary he kept through a dozen years of living under Nazi rule, opened many observers’ eyes to the powerful force of language in shaping, consciously or unconsciously, people’s conceptual worlds. Klemperer argued that the most powerful propaganda tool of the Nazis was “the language of Nazism,” because it changed the value associated with certain terms. Klemperer gives the example of how Nazi usage made “fanatical” a synonym for “heroic” and “virtuous.” Klemperer’s insights inspired George

Orwell's invention of "Newspeak" for his masterpiece *1984*. Newspeak was a language controlled by the totalitarian state Oceania to shape the mentalities and thoughts of its subjects, eliminating concepts such as liberty, freedom, and democracy from language, and, hence, from thought. While Klemperer and Orwell were clearly imagining how language functioned in a totalitarian state, there are some connections to the context of the French Revolution. Specifically, Klemperer's work has inspired me to think about how language serves as a management device and changes with the social and political context to serve new relations of power. Revolutionaries in France and Saint-Domingue eventually sought to eliminate racialist language from public discourse as a way to transform colonial society and to bring it in-line with revolutionary principles.

Another German theorist who provided groundbreaking insights fundamental to a study of this kind is Jürgen Habermas. His *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) introduced the concept of the public sphere—formed by the emergence of public institutions that supported a sphere of free debate among individuals interacting on equal terms. Habermas credits the public sphere with creating the space that allowed for new forms of sociability in the eighteenth century that promoted the growth of public opinion and modern ideas of individualism and democracy. Habermas' theoretical framework helps give meaning to the study of public discourse.

J.G.A. Pocock's *Politics, Language, and Time* (1971) is useful for thinking about language as a historical force, the study of which reveals how power was communicated and distributed within a given society. Pocock noted the influence of Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of the Scientific Revolutions* in turning scholars' attention toward the importance of language and discursive paradigms. For Pocock, Kuhn's work shows how

language systems “help constitute both [people’s] conceptual worlds and the authority-structures, or social worlds, related to these.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, French philosopher Michel Foucault has theorized about the connection between the discursive systems that form knowledge and the systems of power that exercise control over the individual in his famous work *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). Foucault’s work in particular has inspired the trend in cultural history to analyze discourse in various historical contexts to understand how relations of power are conveyed in those settings.

Historian Lynn Hunt’s famous study of revolutionary political culture, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (1984), pointed out the importance of language to revolutionaries as “an instrument of political and social change.”<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, historian Keith Michael Baker’s work on the political culture of the French Revolution has had an important influence on my thinking about the connection between language and politics. As Baker observes in *Inventing the French Revolution* (1990), politics is about defining the situation and making claims to power. He notes that “political culture is, in this sense, the set of discourses or symbolic practices by which these claims [to power] are made.”<sup>23</sup> This dissertation will make a contribution to the study of political culture during the French Revolution by analyzing the language of race used by revolutionaries in France and free people of color in Saint-Domingue in their effort to create new social realities in the colony.

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<sup>21</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 15.

<sup>22</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 219.

<sup>23</sup> Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 4.

Based on the theoretical framework discussed above that sees language as a symbolic system through which power and authority is articulated and dispersed through society, this dissertation will explore the negotiation of racial categories and evaluate the contexts in which racist speech was deployed. As mentioned previously, racial categories are unstable and require symbolic systems to give them meaning and solidify them. Turn-of-the-century anthropologist Franz Boas was perhaps one of the earliest theorists to challenge the concept of “scientific racism” as advanced by physical anthropologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Boas suggested that the “scientific” physical measurements taken by anthropologists to classify individuals into races were arbitrary and that race itself was a cultural concept. Anthropologist Ashley Montagu dealt the fatal blow to the idea of race as an objective, scientific category. His *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth* (1942) was written at a time when Nazi race science was driving a murderous campaign against millions of European Jews and other racially defined groups in order to create a “racially pure” Third Reich. Montagu argued that race is a culturally defined social category and not a biological category that could justify social or political discrimination. My own interpretation of how racist language functions in society as a management device is inspired by the insights of David Theo Goldberg. His *Racist Culture* (1993) explored the function of race and racism as discursive objects that define groups and justify social inequalities.

In colonial Saint-Domingue, there evolved an incredibly complex system of racial classification ranging from slaves, free people of color, and whites. The language used to describe these different groups reflected the complexity of the situation. Colonial society developed a fascinatingly diverse vocabulary for the different groups. Multiple terms

existed for the slave population, including “noirs,” “nègres,” and “Africains,” as well as for the whites, such as “petits blancs” and “grand blancs.” However, perhaps as a reflection of their ‘intermediary’ position in colonial society, the greatest multiplicity of terms was used to refer to free people of color, some of which include *mulâtres*, *affranchis*, *nègres libres*, *libres de couleur*, *hommes de couleur*, *citoyens de couleur*, and, eventually, *citoyens du 4 avril*.

One of the purposes of this dissertation is to explore how the meaning and usage of these terms changed over time by asking questions about the context in which they were employed, who they were employed by, and the audiences to whom they were addressed. Additionally, I show that racial discourse shifted during the revolutionary era in response to changing political circumstances, demonstrating that changes in racial language were a negotiation of political power. As the political context in France and Saint-Domingue evolved, there emerged a disavowal of race in public discourse on both sides of the Atlantic. I argue that free people of color in Saint-Domingue and revolutionaries in France sought, in essence, to deracialize the public sphere through changes in the language of race in order to legitimize and consolidate the power of free people of color. Because this dissertation analyzes public discourse, its focus remains on the struggle between whites and free people of color, as both groups utilized the press to make claims of legitimacy and assertions of power. As opposed to the slaves’ fight for freedom, the battle between whites and free people of color had an important linguistic dimension as their exclusion was based on defining the situation, whereas the oppression of slaves was based on the use of coercive force.

This dissertation contributes to the long tradition of scholarship on the position of free people of color in New World slave societies. Historian Frank Tannenbaum's *Slave and Citizen* (1946) was the first to look at racism against free people of color in a comparative context. Tannenbaum tried to explain why the color line was seemingly more rigid in the United States than in Latin America. In his view, Latin American colonies provided more opportunities for slaves to obtain freedom and greater social mobility for free people of color than British colonies because of the tradition of Catholicism and Roman law prevalent in the Iberian Peninsula. While Tannenbaum's analysis focused on the cultural traditions of the colonizer, subsequent scholarship building on Tannenbaum's observations looked at material conditions in the colonies to explain differences in race relations. In 1971, historian Carl Degler published *Neither Black nor White*, exploring different racial attitudes in the United States and Brazil. Degler concluded that it was the demographic and economic conditions of Brazilian society that provided slaves and people of African descent in general more avenues for social advancement. The same year, historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall applied a materialist approach to the study of Saint-Domingue. Hall compared eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue to nineteenth-century Cuba as both societies were at those times the world's largest supplier of sugar and had economies built around slave labor. Hall saw racism as a form of social control that grew out of the extreme demographic imbalance between slave and free in these societies.

Historian John Garrigus's *Before Haiti* (2006) has made a more recent contribution to the study of race in Saint-Domingue. Adding to the work of French historian Yvan Debbasch (1967) on the development of a segregationist legal system in

Saint-Domingue, Garrigus's study synthesizes the materialist and cultural approach to racism to explain the social position of free people of color. Garrigus argues that "The constant influx of new African workers, the brutality of the plantation regime, the high ratio of male to female colonists, the military and economic value of local patronage networks, and isolation from other colonists all encouraged European men to free their children of color and establish them economically."<sup>24</sup> Up until 1763, Garrigus argues, the wealthiest members of this free colored planter class were treated as full members of "white" society. After 1763, though, "cultural and political forces inspired and shaped the new color line, while the ever-mounting economic success of these [free colored] families ensured that resentful whites would adopt the new racist stereotypes."<sup>25</sup> Scholarship by Dominique Rogers has suggested, though, that the segregationist legal system identified by Debbasch and Garrigus was not as extreme or rigid as the laws themselves would suggest. She does, however, acknowledge that Saint-Domingue remained a racist society permeated with the idea of black inferiority.<sup>26</sup> This dissertation contributes to the scholarly literature on racism in colonial and revolutionary Saint-Domingue by examining the symbolic systems that allowed for the management of social groups according to racial definitions.

There exists a substantial body of literature on the "colonial question" (which also included slavery and the slave trade) in the parliamentary debates of the French Revolution. The first English language work on this subject was historian Carl Lokke's *France and the Colonial Question* (1932). Lokke provided a thorough discussion of "the

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<sup>24</sup> Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Dominique Rogers, "On the Road to Citizenship" in *The World of the Haitian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 72-76.



application of liberal Revolutionary theories to the colonial question from the outbreak of the French Revolution to the evacuation of Egypt in 1801.”<sup>27</sup> Lokke was the first to observe a process that historian Laurent Dubois would later term “republican racism,” whereby the French attempted to meld revolutionary ideals with colonial power structures. Lokke argues that rather than sacrifice the colonies to maintain its principles, “the Republic abandoned instead its revolutionary ideals, and undertook, in 1801, to restore the Colbert system in the West Indies.”<sup>28</sup> While Lokke provides a thorough reading of parliamentary debates, his history does not examine colonial sources. Events in the colonies and the metropole remain largely separated in his account. Lokke mentions events in Saint-Domingue only for context to understand decisions in France rather than to analyze how the two worlds were interconnected.

After Lokke, English-language scholarship on the colonial question in the French Revolution largely disappeared; however, the French scholar Gabriel Debien began to explore more of the specific political networks of lobbyists formed in Paris. Debien’s *Essai sur le Club Massiac* (1954) researched the political activities of the absentee planters who formed the pro-colonial Club Massiac, which heavily influenced the colonial policies adopted by France during the early years of the Revolution. Debien’s study was path breaking at the time for its argument that colonial pressure groups had a hitherto unrecognized impact on the course of the French Revolution. At the time of Debien’s work, historians of the French Revolution tended to ignore the colonies altogether in their accounts, but Debien showed that the colonies were an integral part of the development of the revolution.

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<sup>27</sup> Carl Lokke, *France and the Colonial Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 7.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 8-9.

The most thorough and reliable study of the colonial question during the French Revolution is French historian Yves Benot's *La révolution française et la fin des colonies* (1989). Benot provided a detailed history and meticulous analysis of debates on the colonial question, the policies adopted by France, and their impact on events in the colonies up to the abolition of slavery in 1794. One of Benot's great contributions was to provide a transatlantic synthesis for understanding events in France and Saint-Domingue. Benot demonstrated that the events that culminated in the 1794 abolition of slavery could not be fully understood by looking at the French Revolution and Haitian Revolution in isolation. Another French scholar, Florence Gauthier, has written one of the most recent studies devoted to debates about the political rights of free people of color. Gauthier's *L'aristocratie de l'épiderme* (2007) focuses on the ideology of Julien Raimond, whom she sees as an idealistic humanitarian and early advocate for a universal understanding of human equality. Raimond, however, was himself a slave owner and never actively argued for the immediate abolition of slavery. His primary contribution in the early years of the Revolution was to convince the Amis des Noirs to focus on the issue of racism against free people of color rather than on the plight of slaves in order to further the movement of his group for political rights. Scholarship by Garrigus has helped clarify the ambiguity of Raimond's historical legacy, tracing his conservatism on slavery. Garrigus writes: "Attempting to return Saint-Domingue to a time when social class was more important than African ancestry, Raimond helped destroy the coalition of rich and poor whites that kept a massive enslaved population in check. Though his actions had a radical effect on Saint-Domingue, Raimond was conservative about slavery."<sup>29</sup> Even

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<sup>29</sup> Garrigus, "Opportunist or Patriot? Julien Raimond (1744-1801) and the Haitian Revolution" *Slavery and Abolition* Vol. 28, No. 1 (April 2007), 8.

when the situation in 1793 forced him to embrace a form of limited abolition, his impulse was conservative as he wanted to emancipate some slaves to salvage the plantation system and he thought that the slaves who were freed should first have to embrace the values and mores of free society before being manumitted.<sup>30</sup>

This dissertation will also make a contribution to the literature on the Haitian Revolution. The scholarship on the Haitian Revolution has grown dramatically in recent decades. The origins of Haitian Revolution historiography, though, date to the mid-nineteenth century. In the 1850s, during a period of political turmoil in Haiti, the Haitian scholar Beaubrun Ardouin published a history of the Haitian Revolution that credited the movement of free people of color for political equality with starting the revolution and setting Saint-Domingue on the path toward achieving independence. Ardouin's account is still valuable for its insights into the intricacies of the political struggle between whites and free people of color during those years, but its interpretation was politically motivated to justify the "mulatto oligarchy" under attack from black populist leaders in the 1840s. For many years, the only serious scholarship in English on the Haitian Revolution was C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins* (1938). James sought to counter the interpretation forwarded by Ardouin that saw free people of color at the center of the story of the Haitian Revolution. Viewing the Haitian Revolution through a Marxist lens, James argued that people of color were a bourgeois middle-class that sought to join the white elite and that the real credit for achieving Haitian independence belonged to the slaves who rose up in August 1791. Historian Carolyn Fick's *The Making of Haiti* (1990) was the first work in English to challenge *The Black Jacobins* as the definitive account of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 10.

the Haitian Revolution. Fick was particularly focused on analyzing the Haitian Revolution “from below,” seeking to restore agency to the slave insurgents in their struggle for freedom. Historian David Geggus has made many important contributions to our understanding of different aspects of the Haitian Revolution with numerous articles based on an unmatched mastery of the archives. Historian Jeremy Popkin’s recent book, *You Are All Free* (2010), demonstrates the importance of the struggle for political power between whites and free people of color in driving events in Saint-Domingue, showing that Sonthonax’s abolition of slavery in 1793 was a pragmatic political response to the violence that erupted between whites and free people of color. Finally, historian Malick Ghachem’s *The Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution* (2012) has recently challenged the narrative of rupture central to Haitian Revolution historiography by suggesting that the revolution was the result, in part, of a long-term evolution in legal codes regarding race and slavery rather than the result of sudden change alone.

By focusing on language and discourse, this dissertation will add to a discussion opened by Doris Garraway’s *The Libertine Colony* (2005), which analyzed the pre-revolutionary discourse surrounding free people of color to show how an ideology of paternalistic racism developed in Saint-Domingue. Laurent Dubois’s *Colony of Citizens* (2005) made an important contribution to this discussion by exploring how slave insurgents in Guadeloupe expanded the idea of universalism to include people of color, bringing about a “republican racism” that melded republican values and colonial power structures. This dissertation will show that paternalistic language toward free people of color continued into the revolutionary period, but that between 1789-1792 this language became an illegitimate aspect of public discourse, reflecting the increasing political

power of free people of color. With the disavowal of race in public discourse, a color-blind language of race emerged to identify groups formerly classified by phenotype, reflecting the persistence of racist thinking despite the revolutionary attempt to create an egalitarian society in Saint-Domingue.

This dissertation consists of six chapters (including the introduction and conclusion) covering the development of French racist language from the Code Noir in 1685 through the revolutionary period up to the April 4, 1792 law enfranchising all free men of color in the French colonies. Chapter two covers the language of race as it developed during the colonial period from 1685 to 1789. Engaging with scholarship by John Garrigus on the social position of free people of color in colonial Saint-Domingue and Doris Garraway on the textual representation of colonial social groups, I explore the development of a colonial racist discourse that supported the social and political segregation of free people of color and its influence on metropolitan debates about race and colonial society. Chapter three examines the initial transformation of colonial racist language brought about by the infusion of the egalitarian rhetoric of the revolution into public discourse. It argues that the distinctions made between *hommes de couleur* and *nègres libres* in colonial racist discourse were maintained in metropolitan debates over political rights for free people of color, as reflected in the May 15, 1791 law's continued disenfranchisement of free individuals whose parents were slaves. Chapter four analyzes the impact of the assimilationist logic of the May 15 law enfranchising a limited number of socially elite free men of color on the language of race in France and the radically egalitarian language advanced by free men of color in Saint-Domingue once the May 15 law arrived in the colony. As the National Assembly began

to backtrack on the May 15 law, free men of color in Saint-Domingue used armed resistance to force whites to embrace racial equality, affirmed through the use of a color-blind language of citizenship in colonial public discourse. Chapter five examines the passage of the April 4, 1792 law in France and the formation of the racially integrated Council of Peace and Union in Saint-Domingue as a political counterweight to the all-white Colonial Assembly. Overall, my dissertation speaks to the construction of Francophone discursive systems that gave meaning to the social relations developed in slave societies and to the negotiation of the French language of race as diverse groups marshalled racialist language to articulate and justify competing visions of the power relations between racially defined groups. By April 1792, free men of color had prevailed on both sides of the Atlantic, which resulted in the emergence of a new race neutral language to create a conceptual world that fit the political situation in France and Saint-Domingue.

## Chapter Two: The Language of Race during the Old Regime

The French language of race evolved over the course of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a mode of cultural representation giving meaning to social interaction between whites and people of African descent in a French colonial context. I explore these developments by looking at evidence from three main arenas: metropolitan discourse (dictionaries, encyclopedias, and philosophical treatises from *philosophes* such as Buffon and Raynal), colonial discourse generated by colonial commentators and jurists, and, finally, legal discourse in the form of royal decrees and orders issued from the *Conseil supérieurs* of Saint-Domingue. During the late seventeenth century, the French language of race borrowed heavily from the already established Spanish colonial linguistic system, which indicates the relative invisibility of French colonial society—especially of free people of color—at the time. As French colonial society grew in complexity and significance, language about race developed to reflect that experience and give meaning to new groups and the relationship between them. Overall, this chapter explores how various arenas of public discourse gave a linguistic representation of race that refined the meaning of racialist language to fit the French colonial context by observing, scrutinizing, and categorizing difference. The racial categories that emerged from this process gave meaning and validity to colonial power structures, providing the basis for an exclusionary racial biopolitics.

The identification of social subjects as *nègres*, *nègres libres*, *mulâtres*, *mulâtres libres*, *affranchis*, *blancs*, or a variety of other terms had significant implications regarding the limits or boundaries of their social relationships. These terms provided a conceptual frame of reference for a range of lived experiences from glass ceilings to iron

chains. The processes such as the slave trade and plantation slavery that brought about these experiences were supported by the discursive system that allowed their conception. Foucault has shown the connection between knowledge—and the discursive systems that form knowledge—and systems of power that exercise control over the individual.<sup>31</sup> Scientific knowledge production was encouraged by the colonial enterprise as European states increasingly sponsored the collection of information regarding their colonies. The Eurocentric observations collected in the French encounter with Africa (and other parts of the world) provided the data for Enlightenment-era *philosophes* to order difference.<sup>32</sup> The meaning of difference constructed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the practices that resulted from that understanding are embedded in the language of race. Assessing developments in the meaning and usage of racialist language speaks to changing notions of how the groups conceptualized by that language should relate to each other.

In assessing the development of the French language of race through an analysis of metropolitan discourse, French language dictionaries from the late seventeenth century provide an important starting point. The definitions for various racialist terms contained in French dictionaries reveal that the linguistic system created in the Spanish colonial context heavily influenced the French language of race. Because France colonized the West Indies fairly late in the history of European colonization of the Americas, the French linguistic system borrowed terms already used by the Spanish, and this borrowed

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<sup>31</sup> Hall, Stuart, “Foucault: Power, Knowledge, and Discourse” in *Discourse Theory and Practice* (Sage, 2001), 72-73.

<sup>32</sup> David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Blackwell, 1993), 1-10, and William Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980), 60.



racialist terminology only gradually found expression in its French contextual meaning in metropolitan discourse.

The Spanish empire created the earliest societies that dealt with the encounter between Europeans, Indians, and Africans. In Spanish America, a complex linguistic system developed to account for the social groups, or castes, that defined the social structure. The Spanish social hierarchy in the New World divided castes into mixed and unmixed, and then classified groups within those two categories according to their origins. *Españoles*, *indios*, and *negros* comprised the unmixed castes, but a more complex vocabulary existed for the mixed castes, which included terms such as *mestizos*, *mulatos*, and *zambos*. As Jack Forbes has shown in his study of Spanish racialist language, the meaning of these terms shifted over time and varied according to the different regions of the Spanish-American empire. In general, though, *mestizo* referred to Spanish-Indian mixtures; *mulato* denoted African-Indian mixtures, and *zambo* signified African-*mestizo/mulato* mixtures.<sup>33</sup>

The Spanish did not make up a completely new linguistic system or set of terms to account for the emergence of new groups in colonial society. The term “*mulato*,” for instance, originally developed in the context of the Iberian conversion from Islamic to Catholic rule, taking on connotations of cultural and religious hybridity, whereas in the Spanish colonial context, *mulato* was used to designate ethnic hybridity, referring to individuals born from a Spaniard and an Indian.<sup>34</sup> The etymology of “mulato” traces to

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<sup>33</sup> See Jack D. Forbes, *Black Africans and Native Americans: Color, Race and Caste in the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples* (Blackwell, 1988), 160-62.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 132.

the Spanish word for mule (*mula*).<sup>35</sup> The “mule” is an example of a true hybrid created by crossing two different species, in this case a donkey and a horse. The etymology of “mulato” indicates the derogatory connotation of the term given its derivation from the word for “mule” and its implication that the individual being labeled a “mulato” was a hybrid creature of two separate species. The derogatory connotation of a term used to label people from two different cultural or religious heritages points to the prejudice of early modern Spain and how those ideas were transplanted in the New World and applied to interactions between Spaniards and, at first, Indians and, later, African slaves.

French dictionaries from the late seventeenth century reveal that the definition of French racialist terms came from the Spanish colonial context and that the various racialist terms were not yet a prevalent element of French metropolitan discourse. For example, Antoine Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel*, originally published in 1690, contains entries for “Negre,” “Noir,” “Mulatre,” “Mestif,” and “Quarterone.” However, the definition given for these terms relates primarily to how they were used in the Spanish context rather than in the French. The term “negre” has roots in the Spanish term “negro” and is suggestive of the influence of the Spanish linguistic system on racialist discourse in the New World—the English and Dutch also adapted this term to apply to people of African descent in their colonies. The meaning of the original term “negro” and its various offshoots in other languages evolved over time from specific socio-historic conditions in the West Indies. In metropolitan Spain, “negro” designated someone with dark skin; it did not denote a particular geographic or ethnic origin or status—it simply referenced physical appearance. When the term was transplanted to the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 132-148. Jack Forbes discusses the debate on whether “mulato” derives from the Spanish “mula” or the Arabic “muwallad.”

Americas and applied to African slaves, the term “negro” began to take on connotations of status and geographic/ethnic origin.<sup>36</sup> While Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel* does not define “negre” solely based on its Spanish context, it provides the broad usage of the term in the West Indies, grounding it in a specific geographic region. The *Dictionnaire universel* defines “nègre” as “*Esclave noir* that is taken from the coast of Africa, and is sold in the islands of America for the culture of the earth ....”<sup>37</sup> This definition includes geographic origin, color, and status. Interestingly, in the *Dictionnaire universel*, “noir” designates an “inhabitant of [Guinea] on the coasts of Africa.” The contrast between these two definitions point to an important conceptual distinction in the French language of race from the late seventeenth century. “Noir” referenced geography and color, but it is not situated in the West Indies nor connected to status. “Negre” was not a catch-all term for people of African descent, rather it applied specifically to black slaves in the West Indies.

The entry for “Mulâtre” deserves special attention as well, because, over the course of the eighteenth century, *mulâtre* would become the primary identifier attached to the free people of color population of the French colonies. Furetière’s dictionary defines *mulâtre* in the following way:

This is a name that is given in the Indies to those who come from a *Negre* and from an *Indienne*, or from an *Indien* and a *Negre*. As for those who are born from an *Indien* and an *Espagnole*, one calls them *Metis*; and one calls *Jambos*, those who are born from a savage and from a *Métice*. They are all different in color and in their hair. The Spanish also call *Mulates*, the children born from a father and mother of different religions, such as from a *More* and an *Espagnole*;...<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 69-79.

<sup>37</sup> See “Negre” in Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel, contenant generalement tous les mots françois, tant vieux que modernes, et les termes des sciences et des arts*. Volume 3 (La Haye, 1727).

<sup>38</sup> See “Mulat, ou Mulatre” in Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel* Volume 3 (La Haye, 1727).

The fact that the definition for *mulâtre*—and related terms such as *metis* and *jambos*—is taken entirely from the Spanish context immediately stands out. Additionally, according to Furetière’s dictionary, the seventeenth-century use of the term refers to individuals of African and Indian origin rather than offspring with African and European ancestry. The definition above also emphasizes the religious context in which the term was originally employed to designate individuals sharing a Catholic and Islamic heritage.

Thus, the formal definition given to *mulâtre* at the end of the seventeenth century had little in common with the French usage of the term throughout the eighteenth century. Writing at the end of the eighteenth century, Moreau de Saint-Méry, a colonial jurist and revolutionary politician, used *mulâtre* to designate people who occupied a specific nuance between black and white. Furetière’s definition, though, relates more to the notion of an individual being “misallied” or having a hybrid character than it does to color. Late-seventeenth-century French dictionaries reveal a certain degree of slippage in the textualization of *mulâtre* since the meaning of the term varied according to the context in which it was used. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the meaning of *mulâtre* in the French context became increasingly racialized as it was intended to designate someone based purely on a combination of European and African ancestry that was marked by skin color.

The entry for “mulâtre” in the *Dictionnaire universel* also highlights the disparaging implication of the term. The *Dictionnaire universel* notes that “this word is a great insult in Spain. It is derived from *mulet*, an animal engendered from two different species.”<sup>39</sup> While connecting the individual to an animal is insulting in itself, the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

correlation to a mule also implies that the individual targeted by the label “mulâtre” is unnatural. In addition to the derogatory connotations of the term, the reliance on *mulâtre* despite its admitted denigration of the subject points to the imposition of power and order through the European gaze. As the dominant group, Europeans imposed hegemonic power structures by ordering and classifying groups in colonial society. Terms such as “mulâtre” were used to delineate the social hierarchy and assign value to members of a group. Adoption of these terms by those that were labeled by them reflects the hegemonic aspects of the white European hierarchy. However, the emergence of new terms can be read as a challenge to those structures supported by racist linguistic representations. As free people of color grew in population and power within colonial society, new terms such as “gens de couleur” emerged that, though continuing to accept the division of social groups along color lines, were, nevertheless, more respectful than the overtly derogatory “mulâtre.”

Although a critical reading of terms like *mulâtre* informs our understanding of how Europeans imposed hegemonic power structures in the colonial world, the racist terms used to designate groups in colonial society were not prevalent in metropolitan discourse during the late seventeenth century. Dictionaries from that period illustrate the relative invisibility of French colonial society in their reliance on the Spanish context to explain the terms, rather than defining those terms based on their usage in the French context. The *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, published in 1694, even more dramatically demonstrates the invisibility of French colonial society, and especially the racially defined groups in that society, by the complete absence of entries for “mulâtre,” “negre,” “metif,” or “quarteron.”

Comparison of the definitions of “mulâtre” and “quarteron” from the late-seventeenth-century *Dictionnaire universel* and dictionaries from the late eighteenth century points to the growing visibility of free people of color in metropolitan discourse. As previously mentioned, Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel* referred to a “mulâtre” as the offspring of a Native American and a person of African descent. It defined “quarterone” as “the name given in Peru to a child born from an *Espagnol* and from a *mestice*, or *mulâtre*.”<sup>40</sup> In contrast, dictionaries from the late eighteenth century show that these racialist terms gradually took on meaning within the French colonial context. The Abbé Féraud’s *Dictionnaire critique* (1787), for instance, defines “mulâtre” as someone born “from a *nègre* and a *blanche* (which is fairly rare) or from a *blanc* and a *nègresse*, which is very common.”<sup>41</sup> This entry removes the term from its original Spanish context and applies a meaning more appropriate to the French usage as it evolved over the course of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, the Abbé Prévost’s *Manuel Lexique* (1750) defines a “quarteron” as the “name that the inhabitants of Martinique give to the children who are born from a *Blanc* and a *Mulâtresse*.”<sup>42</sup> Prévost’s entry for “quarteron” reflects the increased visibility of free people of color in metropolitan discourse over the course of the eighteenth century.

Analysis of the meaning assigned to racialist language in late-seventeenth-century dictionaries illuminates a couple of broad themes. Firstly, that French terms would take their meaning from the Spanish context makes sense when one considers the extent of the Spanish empire in the Americas, and that the islands claimed by France in the Caribbean,

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<sup>40</sup> See “Quarterone” in Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel* volume 4.

<sup>41</sup> Abbé Féraud, *Dictionnaire critique de la langue française*, Tome Second (Marseille, 1787), 701.

<sup>42</sup> Abbé Prévost, *Manuel Lexique, ou Dictionnaire portatif des mots françois, ...*, Tome 2 (Paris, 1788), 378.

though originally settled by the French, once belonged to Spain, and in the case of Saint-Domingue, more than half of the island continued to be occupied by the Spanish. Secondly, it appears that French colonial society—and certainly people of color—were relatively invisible elements of metropolitan discourse. For much of the seventeenth century, French colonial society in the Caribbean was fairly underdeveloped—populations were small and planters relied mostly on French *engagés* as a labor source. As French colonial society evolved and grew more complex due to interactions between people of European and African descent, the language of race adapted to the changing French colonial context.

The defining aspect of the language of race from early French legal codes is a focus on civil status rather than color. This is certainly true of the most important French law regarding slavery, the *Edit du roi, touchant la police des Isles de l'Amérique Françoise*, issued in 1685 and commonly referred to as the *Code Noir*. The *Code Noir* is known primarily as the first attempt by the French monarchy to police the treatment of slaves in its colonies. Consisting of 52 articles, the *Code Noir* established limits on days slaves could be worked, minimum standards for sustenance, as well as punishments for abusive masters. However, while assuaging the conditions of slavery, the *Code Noir* contained an inherent contradiction by defining slaves as property and setting harsh punishments for runaways and those that physically struck free persons.<sup>43</sup> With regard to the language of race, the remarkable thing about the *Code Noir*, though, is the seeming absence of a racialist mentality in its language.

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<sup>43</sup> *Le code noir ou edit du roy, servant de reglement pour le gouvernement et l'administration de justice et la police des isles françoises de l'Amérique, et pour la discipline et le commerce des nègres et esclaves dans ledit Pays. Donné à Versailles au mois de Mars 1685.* (Paris, 1735).

The *Code Noir* treats slavery as simply a civil status, and it consistently employs neutral terms denoting civil status to refer to those to whom its articles apply. The *Code Noir* is not composed of racially charged terminology. As such, the articles of the *Code Noir* consistently make reference to “Esclaves.” Racially charged language does not find itself in the *Code Noir*, except for Article II calling on those “who have bought *Nègres* newly arrived” to provide them with religious instruction.<sup>44</sup> In writing about the twentieth-century use of the term “*Nègre*,” Frieda Ekotto argues that it acquired a negative and derogatory meaning beginning with its use as a synonym for slave in the *Code Noir*, and she quotes Article XLIV of the *Code Noir* as saying, “Le *Nègre* est meuble.”<sup>45</sup> However, this is not an accurate quote of the *Code Noir*, which instead reads “Déclarons les Esclaves être meubles (We declare slaves to be property).”<sup>46</sup> While Ekotto makes a valid argument that the negative meaning of “*Nègre*” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century arises from the use of it as a synonym for slave, that usage did not originate with the *Code Noir*, rather it developed over time. As noted here, the *Code Noir* almost exclusively used neutral terms that referred only to civil status. The linguistic connection in French legal discourse between civil status and color would develop gradually over the eighteenth century. Recent research by historian Matthew Gerber has found, for instance, that the *Edict of 1685* regarding slavery was not referred to as the *Code Noir* until 1713 at the earliest in letters exchanged between colonial administrators, and the first printed edition of the *Edict of 1685* did not appear with *Code Noir* as the title until 1718.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Frieda Ekotto, *Race and Sex across the French Atlantic: The Color of Black in Literary, Philosophical, and Theater Discourse* (Lexington Books, 2011), 52.

<sup>46</sup> *Le code noir*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Matthew Gerber, “The Origin and Spread of French Slave Law: How the Edict of March 1685 became the Code Noir” (article in progress).



With regard to the language of race, the *Code Noir* does not use the terms “Nègre” and “Esclave” interchangeably. The language of the *Code Noir* is limited to markers of civil status, and it does not reveal a preoccupation with color or any of the racial anxieties surrounding people of color and color-mixing that would emerge in metropolitan legal discourse later in the eighteenth century. The neutrality of the *Code Noir’s* language emerges most clearly in the provisions for the manumission of slaves and their subsequent legal status.

By providing outlets for manumission, the *Code Noir* established slavery as simply a matter of civil status, allowing individuals to potentially change their legal status to that of a free person. For example, an article on children born from relationships between masters and slaves rules that “when the man was not married to another person during his relationship with his *Esclave*, he will marry according to the form observed by the Church the said *Esclave*, who will be freed by these means, and the children rendered free and legitimate.”<sup>48</sup> The provision allowing marriage between masters and slaves and the freeing of their offspring seems to suggest that the *Code Noir* recognized the fundamental humanity of slaves. Within the discursive space of the *Code Noir*, slavery was treated as a legal condition. The language operating within this discursive space reveals no sense of “Esclaves” being regarded as having a degraded racial character that would preclude them from changing civil statuses or having relationships with whites. Overall, the language of the *Code Noir* does not reveal any anxiety over racial mixture resulting from relationships between masters and slaves; it simply defines how those relationships would affect one’s legal status.

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<sup>48</sup> *Le code noir*, 5.

Moreover, Article LIX grants “to the *affranchis* the same rights, privileges, and immunities which are enjoyed by people born free.”<sup>49</sup> Again, the language of the *Code Noir* only makes reference to civil status. It does not employ terms based on color, such as “*nègres libres*” or “*gens de couleur*,” which would later be referenced in laws from the eighteenth century. The only term used to refer to manumitted slaves is “*affranchis*,” which denotes a legal condition. However, the *Code Noir* stipulated that all “*affranchis*” owed a general debt of gratitude to their former masters. Nevertheless, the key point here is that the language of the *Code Noir* shows a surprising absence of racially charged terminology. Additionally, the *Code Noir* provides complete civil equality for freed slaves. Absent are the racial anxieties brought about by the growth in population and economic influence of free people of color that would later give rise to discriminatory laws and a language of race inscribing class hierarchies through color-based attributions.

Although the *Code Noir* did not use racialized terms and those denoting civil status interchangeably, that linguistic practice became commonplace in the years following 1685. In cases where the articles of the *Code Noir* were referenced to provide a legal basis for a decision or justification for an individual action, the term “*Nègre*” was used where the *Code Noir* would have used “*Esclave*.” For instance, in a case from 1705 involving a contestation over an estate in Saint-Domingue, le Lieutenant-Civil du Châtelet (the head of the French civil court based in Paris) ruled “that in America *les Nègres* are *meubles*.”<sup>50</sup> The case apparently involved the estate of an absentee plantation

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>50</sup> *Acte de notoriété donné par Monsieur le Lieutenant-Civil du Châtelet, qui décide qu'en Amérique les Nègres sont meubles* in *Recueils de reglemens, edits, declarations, et arrêts, concernant le commerce, l'administration de la justice, et la police des colonies françaises de l'Amérique, et les engages. Avec le Code Noir, et l'addition audit Code* (Paris, 1745), 102.

owner whose inheritors wanted to relinquish the landed property and retain the slaves serving on the plantation to be sold individually. A claimant in the French civil court wanted the slaves to be tied to the landed estate; however, the Lieutenant-Civil judged that according to the precedent of the *Code Noir* and the *Coutume de Paris* regarding inheritance, “*les Nègres* in [Saint-Domingue] ... are sold, or divided up as moveable property ....”<sup>51</sup> Article XLIV of the *Code Noir* used the term “Esclave” rather than “Nègre” to establish that slaves in the French colonies would be considered *meubles*. Thus, it seems that from the foundation of the *Code Noir* there evolved a linguistic practice, such as in the example of the ruling issued by the French civil court, that melded terms of race and status.

Another example demonstrating the emergence of this linguistic practice involves a case heard by the Royal Council of State in 1720. The case centered on the execution of a slave on board the frigate *la Notre-Dame de Lorette de Nantes* during a return voyage from Macao. The captain submitted an affidavit to the court outlining the events that occurred on board the ship and justifying his actions based on French legal precedents, primarily the *Code Noir*. According to the brief, the ship “finally arrived at Macao in China, where it was obliged to buy *Nègres* in order to replace a part of the crew that had been lost in route.”<sup>52</sup> The affidavit alleges that the slaves bought in Macao sabotaged the return journey to France by spilling the remaining provision of wine, and as a result, the captain had one of the “Nègres” executed and another put in irons, which “rendered calm to all the crew, and returned the other *Nègres* to their work.”<sup>53</sup> After

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 103.

<sup>52</sup> *Arrêt du conseil d'état du roi, Du 17 octobre 1720* in *Recueils de reglemens* (Paris, 1745), 123.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

describing the events that took place, the document provides a legal justification for the actions taken by the captain based on Article XXXV of the *Code Noir* that “pronounces the penalty of death against *les Nègres* in cases of theft.”<sup>54</sup> While the article of the *Code Noir* cited does establish the death penalty “if the case requires it,” the language used in the article only makes reference to civil status—the term “Nègres” is not used.<sup>55</sup> Thus, in everyday usage, the racist term “Nègre” had become a stand in for someone who held the civil status of a slave. These briefs and other legal documents that used “Nègres” as a synonym for slave were eventually published in collections of French law regarding slavery, thereby inserting the linguistic shift that made “Nègre” and “Esclave” interchangeable into the language of race of French jurisprudence.

Language that used “Nègres” as a synonym for slave is seen primarily in documents from jurists providing interpretations of the *Code Noir* or in legal briefs submitted by individuals. However, official decrees or *arrêts* regarding slavery issued by the French monarchy in the eighteenth century employ terminology that combines both race and status. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the monarchy was obliged to issue *édits* or *arrêts* to alter or reinforce certain provisions of the *Code Noir* in response to changing social developments in the colonies or because the original articles were being ignored in some way. In these eighteenth-century laws issued by the French crown, instead of using language that refers exclusively to a certain civil status, the standard practice became to use terms that combined race and status.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>55</sup> *Le Code Noir*, 8.

This emerging linguistic pattern can be seen in laws spanning several different decades. For instance, two laws from 1716 and 1738 establishing the monarchy's policy on sending slaves to France to receive training or religious instruction refer to "les Esclaves Nègres."<sup>56</sup> Additionally, the 1724 version of the *Code Noir* issued for the colony of Louisiana contains several different racialist terms, including "Nègres affranchis" and "Nègres libres."<sup>57</sup> The growth of the linguistic pattern combining terms for race and status was driven by changing social conditions in the French colonies with the emergence of a free black population after several generations of slavery and the need to distinguish between free blacks and slaves in laws that were issued.

Another pattern in the language of race evident in French legal codes concerns the different meaning of "Nègres" and "Noirs." In laws concerning the tax owed to the crown by merchants involved in the slave trade, "Noirs" is consistently used to refer to slaves purchased in Africa to be sold in the French Caribbean, and "Nègre" applied to those slaves once they disembark and are sold in the colonies. A declaration from the French monarchy in 1722 provides a good example of this pattern: "We have moderated the tax of 30 *livres* per head on *Noirs*, which is due to us by the merchants of Nantes, who have introduced *Nègres* ... in the island of Saint-Domingue, to the sum of 21 *livres*."<sup>58</sup> The application of "Noirs" to slaves purchased in Africa remained consistent in other documents as well. An order nullifying the privilege granted to the *Compagnie des*

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<sup>56</sup> *Edit du roi, concernant les Esclaves Nègres des colonies, qui seront amenés, ou envoyés en France. Donné à Paris au mois d'Octobre 1716 in Recueils de reglemens (Paris, 1745) and Declaration du roi, concernant les nègres esclaves des colonies. Donnée à Versailles le 15 Decembre 1738. Registrée en Parlement le 17 Fevrier 1739 (Bordeaux, 1739).*

<sup>57</sup> *Edit du roi, touchant l'Etat et la Discipline des Esclaves Nègres de la Louisiane, Donné à Versailles au mois de Mars 1724 in Recueils de reglemens (Paris 1745).*

<sup>58</sup> *Declaration du roi, Donné à Versailles le 11 Novembre 1722 in Recueils de reglemens (Paris, 1745), 132-133.*

Indes for the trade in Africans along the West African coast also uses “Noirs” throughout the entire document. Article I of the order states: “All merchants and ship owners of the kingdom can in the future freely make commerce and trade in *Noirs* along all the coast of Africa.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, within the language of race, there was a consistent pattern in the eighteenth century that referred to blacks in Africa as “Noirs” and as “Nègres” once they had been sold in the colonies. In terms of the textualization of slaves in these laws concerning the slave trade, it is as if the Atlantic passage transforms “Noirs” to “Nègres.”

The language of race in eighteenth-century French legal discourse also reveals growing racial anxieties and a preoccupation with color. From the earliest French law code regarding slavery, the 1685 *Code Noir*, to the *Police des Noirs* issued toward the end of the eighteenth century, the language of race changed dramatically. Several points arise from an analysis of these changes in language: 1) increasingly restrictive laws on the presence of slaves in France demonstrate the emergence of racial anxieties; 2) revisions to the *Code Noir* show an increasing concern over color-mixing and the growth of a more complex vocabulary of color markers to adapt to changing social realities in the colonies, and 3) the *Police des Noirs* based on the fear that people of color in France posed a threat to the purity of French bloodlines reveals a shift in the perception of slavery as a civil or legal status to it as a sign of degraded racial character.<sup>60</sup>

Comparison of two laws from 1716 and 1738 regulating the entry of slaves sent from the colonies into France exposes heightened anxiety over the presence of slaves in

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<sup>59</sup> *Arrêt du Conseil d'État du Roi, concernant le commerce des Noirs à la cote d'Afrique. Du 31 juillet 1767* (Lyon, 1767), 2.

<sup>60</sup> Sue Peabody, “*There Are No Slaves in France*”: *The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (Oxford University Press, 1996). Peabody was the first historian to point out the significance of the *Police des Noirs* and to suggest its importance as a sign of increasing racial anxieties in France.

France during the time span between the two editions of the law. While the basic provisions of the two editions are the same in the sense of the time frame allowed to slaves to stay in France to learn a skill and the procedures established to register their presence with the proper authorities, the laws differ greatly regarding the potential of slaves brought to France to gain their freedom. Both versions of the decree establish a time limit of three years for a slave from the colonies to stay in France, and both versions declare that the only legitimate reason for slaves to be taken to France is “in order to instruct them in some craft that will render them more useful by their return to the colonies.”<sup>61</sup> However, the contrast between the two versions shows that the law gradually became harsher by making it difficult to free slaves on French soil.

The 1716 *Edit du roi* contained several clauses allowing slaves to gain their freedom if the masters who had sent their slaves to France did not follow the procedures outlined in the decree or allowed the allotted time frame to lapse. For instance, both 1716 and 1738 version contain articles stating, “*Les Esclaves Nègres* of either sex, who have been brought to France by their masters, or who have been sent there by them, cannot pretend to have acquired their freedom, under the pretext of having arrived in the kingdom ....”<sup>62</sup> If masters who have sent slaves to France, though, do not follow the proper registration procedures or retain their slaves for longer than the allotted time frame, the 1716 version of the law provides that “the said *Esclaves* will be freed and cannot be reclaimed.”<sup>63</sup> Additionally, the 1716 *Edit du roi* allows slaves to marry with

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<sup>61</sup> *Declaration du Roy, concernant les nègres esclaves des colonies. Donnée à Versailles le 15 Decembre 1738. Registrée en Parlement le 17 Fevrier 1739* (Bordeaux, 1739), 3.

<sup>62</sup> *Edit du roi, concernant les Esclaves Nègres des colonies, qui seront amenés, ou envoyés en France. Donné à Paris au mois d’Octobre 1716 in Recueils de reglemens* (Paris, 1745), 111; *Declaration du roy, concernant les nègres esclaves des colonies* (Bordeaux, 1739), 2.

<sup>63</sup> *Edit du roi in Recueils de reglemens* (Paris, 1745), 111.

the consent of their master, and “in cases where they have consented, the said slaves are and become free, by virtue of the said consent.”<sup>64</sup> Overall, the *Edit du roi* gives little indication of any racial anxiety over the presence of slaves in France, and it treats slavery as simply a legal status, providing several outlets for slaves to transition from that condition in France.

However, as evidence of growing racial anxieties in France over the presence of people of color, the 1738 *Déclaration du roi* states that if masters do not follow the formal procedures outlined in the law, the slaves will be confiscated and sold back into the colonies.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, the 1738 edition of the law prohibits slaves in France from marrying, “even with the consent of their masters ....”<sup>66</sup> In general, the *Déclaration du roi* regulates the slaves brought to France more harshly than the earlier edition by putting more limits on the ability of slaves to gain their freedom and remain in France. The contrast between these two versions of the law indicates heightened racial anxiety and concern over the presence of people of color in France.

Analysis of the 1724 *Code Noir* issued for Louisiana also reveals deepening racial anxieties and concern over color-mixing, and it highlights an important development in the language of race with the emergence of a more complex vocabulary of terms focused on color. The 1724 *Edit du Roi, touchant l’Etat et la Discipline des Esclaves Nègres de la Louisiane* is essentially a reprint of the original 1685 *Code Noir* with a few revisions that attempt to prohibit sexual relationships between whites and people of color. For instance, article VI of the 1724 code states, “We prohibit our white

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>65</sup> *Declaration du roi* (Bordeaux, 1739), 2.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 3.



subjects of either sex from contracting marriage with *les Noirs*, ...We prohibit also our white subjects, as well as the *Noirs affranchis*, or born free, of living in concubinage with *Esclaves*.”<sup>67</sup> The article further decrees that any slaves that lived in concubinage with their masters will be confiscated “without ever being able to be freed.”<sup>68</sup> However, it also included the following clause, “We do not intend at all for the present article to have place, when *l’homme Noir*, freed, or born free, was not at any point married during his concubinage with his slave.”<sup>69</sup> In those situations where an unmarried free black had a child with a slave, the law requires that they marry, freeing the slave and the children. The original *Code Noir* from 1685 did not prohibit “Blancs” from marrying slaves with whom they had had children. The fact that this later version of the law only allows “Noirs” to marry slaves points to a deepening of racial anxieties and a desire to prohibit color-mixing.

In fact the original *Code Noir* did not mention “Blancs” or “Noirs” at all, which highlights another important point about the later version of the code—the emergence of a more complex vocabulary of racialist terminology. By comparing the 1724 version of the code to the one from 1685, one can see just how dramatically the language of race had evolved in response to several generations of colonial slavery and the subsequent development of a more complex social environment. While the original code only distinguished between “Esclaves” and “Maîtres,” the later version of the *Code Noir* employs a litany of different racialist terms, including, “Blancs,” “Noirs,” “Noirs affranchis,” and “Nègres libres.” This more complex linguistic system served to

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<sup>67</sup> *Edit du roi, touchant l’état et la discipline des esclaves nègres de la Louisiane, Donné à Versailles au mois de Mars 1724 in Recueil de reglemens* (Paris, 1745), 138.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

articulate and describe the emergence of new social groups in the French colonial world, and it shows how the language of race evolved to meet sociological developments in an attempt to impose order on an increasingly chaotic situation.

During the early eighteenth century, the visibility of colonial society and its racially-based hierarchy increased, which resulted in the injection of racist language into metropolitan discourse. Although terms such as “mulâtre” were used in French colonies during the seventeenth century, as seen in French dictionaries from the period, the racist linguistic system employed in the French colonies was not a prevalent element of metropolitan discourse. The publication of several descriptions of the French West Indies during 1720s and 1730s, however, helped to redefine racist terminology in the French context and embed colonial racist thinking in metropolitan philosophical discourse.

Jean Baptiste Labat’s *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l’Amerique* and Pierre-François Xavier de Charlevoix’s *Histoire de l’Isle Espagnole ou de S. Domingue*, published in 1722 and 1731 respectively, offered metropolitan readers descriptions of two French Caribbean colonies—Martinique and Saint-Domingue—that, among other things, characterized the overwhelming dependence of colonial society on African slavery and the complex and unequal social relations that emerged as a result. Labat—himself a slave owner and a Jesuit missionary to Martinique—greatly influenced metropolitan understandings of the colonial world. His account would later be referenced by many *philosophes*, including Buffon and the contributors to the *Encyclopédie*.

Contributing to the increased visibility of people of color in the metropolitan conceptual world, Labat devoted an entire chapter of *Nouveau voyage* to “Des Mulâtres

[et] maniere de les connoître.” Labat’s chapter title on “mulâtres” suggests that he perceived people of color as undifferentiated objects to be observed, classified, and ordered. This perspective is inherent in the European colonial project, which imposes artificial relationships of power on social subjects through the European gaze—creating knowledge in order to assign value to social subjects and legitimate hegemonic power structures.

Labat defines “mulâtre” as “the children who are born from a *noire* mother and a white father, or from a black father and a white mother.” Labat does not describe the social formation of people of mixed-race in value neutral terms, as he notes that “... it is all too frequent.” Labat advances an essentializing and reductive characterization of “mulâtres.” According to Labat, “the *Mulâtres* are ordinarily well-made, with good height, vigorous, strong, nimble, industrious, courageous, and hardy beyond imagination; they have a lot of liveliness, but they are given to their pleasures, to cheating, to pride, ..., to wickedness, and they are capable of the greatest crimes.”<sup>70</sup> Despite ascribing some positive traits to people of color, Labat’s characterization is nevertheless reductive—framing the group as an undifferentiated mass with similar traits. Furthermore, by categorizing individuals along color lines and assigning them attributes unique to their color, Labat contributes to the process of racial formation, providing a discursive pillar to conceptual power structures supporting the colonial racial hierarchy.

In addition to Labat’s *Nouveau voyage*, Charlevoix’s *Histoire de l’Isle Espagnole* also provided metropolitan audiences with a description of colonial society that contributed to the increased visibility of colonial racial formations. Published in 1731,

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<sup>70</sup> Jean Baptiste Labat, *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l’Amerique ...* Volume 1 (La Haye, 1724), 40-41. Original published in Paris in 1722.

Charlevoix based his description on the manuscript of Jean-Baptiste le Pers, a Jesuit missionary who arrived in Saint-Domingue in 1704. His account reveals similar reductive tendencies as Labat in that both authors objectify and categorize groups of people, assigning value based on a Eurocentric perception. Specifically, in his discussion of the qualities assigned to the slaves from various African nations, Charlevoix comments that “the Senegalese are out of all the *Nègres* the best made, the easiest to discipline, and the most proper to domestic service.” The “Bambaras” are “the biggest, but they are thieves.” The “Congos” are “the smallest, ... but they run away easily.” The “Nagos” are “the most humane,” while the “Mondongos” are “the cruelest.”<sup>71</sup> And so on. In addition to reducing the nature of each group down to a pithy statement, Charlevoix’s characterization only describes each group in terms of its utility in the colonial slave society. Value is not assigned based on an appreciation of each group, but only on what each group offers to the dominant social group of slave owners. The tendency to make these sorts of value assessments is a hallmark of the dominant racist discourse that subsumes differences among individuals, categorizing them into groups along racial lines and assigning values that support the racist power structure.

The racial formations articulated by Labat and Charlevoix extended beyond the colonial world, though, weaving their way into metropolitan discourse via Buffon and other *philosophes*. The contributors to the *Encyclopédie*, for instance, borrowed almost verbatim from Labat’s definition of “mulâtre,” and Buffon relied heavily on both Charlevoix and Labat for his characterization of the West African nations in *Histoire naturelle*. Overall, the descriptions by Labat and Charlevoix point to the increased

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<sup>71</sup> Pierre François de Charlevoix, *Histoire de l’isle espagnole ou de St. Domingue ...* (Paris, 1731), 498.

visibility in metropolitan discourse of colonial society and the racially defined social groups that emerged from it. The language of inclusion and exclusion formulated as part of colonial power structures infiltrated metropolitan discourse and became popularized and amplified via more general philosophical works. The philosophical works that amplified colonial racist language are typically associated with the emergence of modern liberal thought—works that examine the natural, social, and political world through the lens of rational critique. The transfusion of colonial racist language and thought into eighteenth-century philosophical discourse reveals a broader point about the connection between racist thinking and modernity.<sup>72</sup>

The comte de Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* provides an important example of the coalescence of colonial racist thinking and Enlightenment rationalism in eighteenth-century philosophical discourse. Buffon's massive undertaking to catalog all available knowledge of the natural world epitomizes the Enlightenment's faith in empiricism and its drive to categorize, classify, and order through rational observation. His project points to the connection between Enlightenment rationalism and the emergence of modern racism in the way that it imposes order on the different groups of humankind.<sup>73</sup>

Among other subjects scrutinized in *Histoire naturelle*, Buffon examines the origins and nature of the different types of "human variety." A contentious debate among eighteenth-century naturalists considered whether humans shared a common origin or whether human "varieties" were essentially separate species with multiple origins. Buffon posited that human life sprang from the same source and that human variety could be explained through variances in climate. While his theory of human variety advanced

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<sup>72</sup> Goldberg, *Racist Culture*, 1-10.

<sup>73</sup> Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans*, 60.

the “essential sameness” of humanity, it nevertheless explained diversity through climate-induced degeneration from an original form. Based in part on the phenomenon of “nègres blancs” who developed white blotches on their skin, Buffon concluded that Europeans must be the original human form since the reverse phenomenon of whites developing blotches of black skin did not occur. Buffon classified groups deviating from the white norm according to skin color, which he noted was the most important marker of human variety.<sup>74</sup> Thus, despite overtly advancing a thesis of “essential sameness,” Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle* is embedded with a race-based classification scheme that defines races primarily on skin color and assumes that non-white skin color is a degenerative abnormality.

Buffon utilizes some of the racialist language introduced thus far, specifically the terms “noir” and “nègre.” His use of these racialist terms is not entirely consistent, though. Generally, Buffon assigns the term “noir” to peoples from all parts of the world with a darkened skin tone approaching what observers perceived as “black.” Second-hand ethnographic data compiled from diverse travel narratives provided the basis for Buffon’s judgment as he never traveled to the colonies or Africa to make first-hand observations. In addition to referencing color, the term “Nègre” also possessed a geographic dimension as Buffon typically used it to designate West Africans.

In the racial formation that takes shape in Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle*, “Nègre” takes on added meaning beyond referencing color and geographic location to also imply that “Nègres” are somehow inherently suited for slavery. Buffon’s characterization of “Nègres” reveals the influence of colonial discourse meant to rationalize and legitimize

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<sup>74</sup> Georges-Louis Buffon, *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière, avec la description du cabinet du Roy*. Volume 3 (Paris, 1749), 371.

slavery on his perception of Africans. Buffon does not see all sub-Saharan African groups as being the same. He notes that it is necessary to “divide the *noirs* into different races, and it appears that one can reduce them to two principal groups: the *Nègres* and the *Caffres*.”<sup>75</sup> Within the category of “Nègres,” Buffon counts “the *noirs* of Nubia, Senegal, Cape Verde, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast ...” and other nations found along the West African coast. Thus, Buffon labels all of the West African ethnic groups that Europeans encountered in the slave trade as “Nègres,” tying the meaning of the term to the condition of slavery. Buffon places South Africans and “all the peoples of the eastern coast of Africa” in the category of “Caffres.”<sup>76</sup>

His ethnographic description of these two racial groups within “la race des noirs” shows how fundamentally his analysis was beholden to cultural representations emerging from a discursive system attempting to uphold slavery. The descriptions of colonial society by Labat and Charlevoix heavily influenced Buffon’s view of the West African groups labeled in his system of classification as “Nègres.” By conflating views of Africans enslaved in the French colonies with West African people in general, Buffon invests “nègre” with a prejudicial and degrading meaning. Drawing on Labat and Charlevoix, Buffon’s characterization of West African nations focuses on the suitability of the African body for labor in the colonies and its value within the colonial system. Based on Labat’s *Nouveaux voyages*, he writes, “[Nègres] of Guinea are also very good for the culture of the earth and for other manual labor, those of Senegal are not as strong, but they are better suited for domestic service and more capable of learning crafts.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 453.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 467.

Buffon's ethnographic generalizations synthesized from Charlevoix are more overtly negative and degrading. For example, citing Charlevoix, he wrote, "... all of the *Nègres* from Guinea have extremely limited intellect, there are many of them who appear to be altogether stupid, that one sees some of them who cannot count beyond three, that they do not think at all, that they do not have any memory, and that the past is as unknown to them as the future."<sup>78</sup> It should be noted, however, that Buffon follows up his summary of Charlevoix with a polemic against the abuses and hardships of slavery, drawing attention to the misfortune of slaves. Indignantly, he exclaims: "How can men in whom there remains any sentiment of humanity adopt these maxims, turning them into a prejudice, and try to legitimate by these means the excesses that the thirst for gold makes them commit!"<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, Buffon stops short of calling for an end of slavery or systematically countering the negative view advanced by Charlevoix, thereby contributing to the amplification of colonial racist thought in metropolitan discourse.

Buffon's ethnography of "Caffres" illuminates the manner in which the meaning of "nègre" extended beyond color and geographic designations to assume a degrading meaning that tied "nègres" to an essential suitability and fitness for slavery. In discussing the South African "Hottentots," Buffon notes several contrasts between them and "vrais Nègres." In addition to disavowing property and being more nomadic, the "Hottentots" are "independent and extremely jealous of their liberty; these differences are, as one sees it, more than sufficient to regard them as a different people from the *Nègres* of whom we have written."<sup>80</sup> Turning his attention to East Africa, Buffon asserts that "the people of

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 468.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 470.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 470-471.



Madagascar and Mozambique are *noirs*, ..., [but] neither of them are *vrais Nègres*, and even though those of the coast are submitted to the Portuguese, those of the interior of the continent are incredibly savage and jealous of their liberty ...”<sup>81</sup> Finally, in discussing the Shona people of modern-day Zimbabwe, Buffon comments that “these people, though quite as black, are different from the *Nègres*, they do not have traits as harsh nor ugly, their body does not have a bad odor, and they cannot support servitude nor work [in the colonies] ...”<sup>82</sup> Though ascribed the same physical color, “Caffres” are not given the same negative qualities—primarily ugliness and smelliness—as “*Nègres*,” which indicates that the negative traits attributed to “*Nègres*” emerged from an encounter under unequal conditions. “*Nègres*” were encountered under extremely degrading conditions in the colonies and via the slave trade on the coast of West Africa, and Europeans projected negative traits onto them because of the degraded state in which they were observed.

Those ethnic groups that Europeans encountered in the slave trade and subsequently enslaved in their New World colonies were deemed “*Nègres*,” while Africans who were not encountered under the same system of exploitation were given a separate racial classification as “Caffres.” Thus, a certain essential fitness or suitability for slavery became part of the meaning of “*Nègre*.” With Buffon’s usage, the term designated more than just color or geography—It indicated that the individual being labeled was in his/her nature suited to be a slave, even if not technically enslaved as the term applied to enslaved and free West Africans alike.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 478.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 477-478.

In his landmark study of the idea of “blackness” during the Enlightenment, Andrew Curran discusses Buffon’s ethnographic project at length, pointing out that while Buffon synthesized material from colonial writers his characterization of Africans was not as reductive as theirs. Curran notes that Buffon recognized the diversity of the people of Africa through his division of the “race de noirs” into “Nègre” and “Caffre.” Furthermore, Curran argues that Buffon undermined the racist portrait of Africans painted by slavery apologists by emphasizing “humankind’s fundamental sameness” and sympathetically commenting on the plight of slaves.<sup>83</sup> Even though Buffon’s thesis argued for essential human sameness under his monogenic worldview, his project was nevertheless part of the discursive power structures that supported slavery by generating Eurocentric ethnographic knowledge of Africans and the black body.<sup>84</sup> Buffon’s attempt to accumulate knowledge of the varieties of humankind and order them according to Eurocentric value judgments links to the Enlightenment origins of modern racism. Drawing heavily on ideas emerging from colonial racist discourse, Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle* became embedded with the values of racist colonial society, illuminating the means through which attitudes emerging from the colonial setting entered metropolitan discourse. This dynamic process points to a discursive shift in the cultural representation of racism from an overtly racist colonial discourse to a latent racism embedded in seemingly objective and scientific analysis of essential human sameness. Finally,

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<sup>83</sup> Andrew S. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 107-116. Curran’s reading of Buffon is shared by Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 36.

<sup>84</sup> My interpretation of Buffon draws on Goldberg’s perspective on the Enlightenment in general in Goldberg, *Racist Culture*. This view is also seen in William Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africa*, Michele Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des Lumières* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 18, and Louis Sala-Molins, *Dark Side of the Light: Slavery and the French Enlightenment* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 103-106.

Buffon's work illuminates how racist language acquired additional meaning, as Buffon invested "nègre" with value judgments extending beyond a simple color or geographic designation.

As Curran notes, "it would be difficult to exaggerate the impact that" Buffon had on the understanding of human difference after mid-century. Buffon's thesis of climate-induced degeneration shaped the understanding of subsequent commentators on the origins of blackness and how it fit into European conceptual frameworks. After 1750, "an increasingly authoritative and naturalized understanding of the *nègre*" emerged that essentialized perceived moral, physical, and intellectual differences between black Africans and white Europeans.<sup>85</sup> Prejudicial views of the physical and intellectual liabilities of black bodies took on "a conceptual significance" that placed the *nègre* on a lower rung of humanity than Europeans and provided the basis for slavery apologists to argue that the essential difference between whites and *nègres* legitimized slavery.<sup>86</sup>

In addition to revealing the diffusion of Buffonian explanations of human diversity, Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* provides a measurement of the pulse of racist discourse during the High Enlightenment. In many ways, the *Encyclopédie* represents the consummate Enlightenment project. Ambitiously attempting to catalog available scientific, social, political, and economic knowledge, the *Encyclopédie* epitomizes the Enlightenment drive to empirically scrutinize and order the natural world. As part of this mission, Denis Diderot and Jean Rond d'Alembert recruited numerous *philosophes*—all of whom had separate agendas and borrowed information from wide-

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<sup>85</sup> Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness*, 118.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

ranging sources—to contribute to the *Encyclopédie*, which undermined the consistency of the perspective presented in the great reference work. As a result, the discursive construction of the *nègre* in the *Encyclopédie* “is a complex hybrid of pro-planter rhetoric, anti-slavery diatribes, and philosophical or anti-clerical digressions.”<sup>87</sup>

The *Encyclopédie* contains several entries ranging from natural history to political economy under the broad heading of “Nègre.” The natural history definition of *nègre* focuses primarily on geographic context and physical features to delineate the group—avoiding direct references to slavery as part of the definition. The *Encyclopédie* identifies *nègres* as people who inhabit the region “from the tropic of Cancer to the tropic of Capricorn” in Africa and who are distinguished “not only [by] their color ...[but also] by all of their facial features, large and flat noses, big lips, and wool instead of hair ...” As a sign of the hardening of racist thought and a more trenchant understanding of difference, the entry notes that *nègres* “... appear to constitute a new species of man.”<sup>88</sup>

As previously noted, one of the more significant aspects of Buffon’s usage of “nègre” in *Histoire naturelle* is that it conflates the general usage of the term and the specific colonial usage referring to black slaves, which embeds the conceptualization of *nègres* with the values emerging from the colonial plantation system. The *Encyclopédie* reveals a similar linguistic and discursive synthesis between general natural history understandings and specific colonial understandings of the meaning of *nègre*.<sup>89</sup> By recycling the observations of pro-slavery colonial writers, the *Encyclopédie* ties the natural history definition of *nègre* to its meaning in the colonial context. The

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 149.

<sup>88</sup> Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres. Tome 22* (A Lausanne et à Berne, 1780-1782), 305.

<sup>89</sup> Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness*, 155-157.

*Encyclopédie*'s discursive construction of *nègre* applies generalizations about colonial slaves to all "nègres," thereby investing the essential nature of black Africans with the reductive and essentialist meaning derived from the exploitive colonial plantation system.

By conflating characterizations of enslaved Africans or people of African descent with black Africans in general, the *Encyclopédie* amplifies a discursive pattern that sees the "nègre" as a degenerate form of humankind with physical and intellectual liabilities that make that group inherently suited for slavery. The characterization of *nègres* found in the *Encyclopédie* is embedded with value judgments based on their potential productivity within the plantation economy. The entry for "Nègres, commerce" notes that "the best *nègres* are taken from Cape Verde, Angola, Senegal, [and] the kingdom of the Jaloffes [Wolofs]..."<sup>90</sup> In this context, "best" is seen in terms of one's suitability for labor in the plantation economy. Furthermore, borrowing from Labat and Charlevoix, the *Encyclopédie* assigns specific regional groups traits based on their function or role in the colonial system. For instance, "the *nègres Minas* are vigorous and are well-suited for learning crafts ...."<sup>91</sup> The reductive perspective of the *Encyclopédie* sees the *nègre* primarily as an economic unit whose output depends on proper management and manipulation:

Their natural harshness requires that one not have too much indulgence for them, also neither too much severity; for if a moderate punishment renders them manageable and animates them to work, an excessive rigor repels them and carries them to throw themselves among the *nègres marrons* or savages who inhabit the inaccessible areas of these islands ...<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> *Encyclopédie*, 312.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid

<sup>92</sup> Ibid

The focus of this prescription is on manipulating black African bodies so as to achieve maximum productivity within the plantation economy. In this discursive system, the value of black bodies is reduced only to what they can contribute to the colonial system.

Additionally, the *Encyclopédie* essentializes *nègres* by reducing them to certain core character traits. The section titled “character of *nègres* in general” notes that “if by chance one encounters honest men among the *nègres* of Guinea (the greatest number of them are always vicious), they are for the most part inclined to libertinage, vengeance, theft, and lying ...”<sup>93</sup> This overriding negative characterization is qualified to some degree by the acknowledgement that “the defaults of the *nègres* are not so universally widespread that one cannot recognize some very good subjects ...”<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, the overall perspective of the *Encyclopédie* reduces *nègres* to certain essential qualities and assumes certain inherent “defaults” that some “very good” individuals may overcome. The discursive construction of the *nègre* in the *Encyclopédie* is part of a larger trend in the discourse of race. After mid-century, there emerged a hardening of racial conceptions and a more trenchant understanding of difference. Black Africans were increasingly seen as a lower form of humanity due to climate-induced degeneration. The *nègre*’s perceived physical and intellectual degeneration created a conceptual gap between black Africans and white Europeans. As Curran notes, the discursive system constructed about the *nègre* (originating in colonial discourse and amplified by the *Encyclopédie*) provided an indirect legitimation of slavery. He writes that the *Encyclopédie* promoted “a larger

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 314.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid

nexus of ideas rendering intelligible, if not justifiable, the *nègre*'s destiny in the colonies.”<sup>95</sup>

In tune with this mid-century conceptual paradigm that saw an increasingly wide and unbridgeable gap between whites and people of African descent, historian Yvan Debbasch has identified the development of a “segregationist legal order” targeting free people of color in the French colony of Saint-Domingue. Debbasch demonstrates that after 1750 colonial law codes began to draw a rigid line between whites and free blacks and people of color based on the idea that free people of color were a necessary intermediary group to uphold slavery. These segregationist laws took various forms, such as prohibitions on practicing certain professions and holding public office, sumptuary laws, militia segregation, and the physical segregation of public spaces.<sup>96</sup> The perception that people of African descent were fundamentally and essentially inferior to whites and, therefore, should be subject to a different legal condition contributed to the development of the segregationist system, even though the *Code Noir* stated that *affranchis* should have equal civil status with whites. Colonial discourse emphasized the difference of free people of color and argued that the preservation of the colonial slave system required their relegation to an intermediary social status between slave and free, which shows how racist thinking colored conceptual frameworks and reference points for social realities.

The mentality underpinning the development of the segregationist order in colonial society also found expression in metropolitan discourse via the *Encyclopédie*.

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<sup>95</sup> Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness*, 161.

<sup>96</sup> Yvan Debbasch, *Couleur et liberté: le jeu de critère ethnique dans un ordre juridique esclavagiste* (Paris: Dalloz, 1967), 93-96.

The entry for “mulâtre” explains the usage of the term in the French colonies as designating “a child born from a *noire* mother, and a white father, or from a *noir* father and a white mother.” The entry comments further that “the latter case is rare, [but] the first is very common due to the *libertinage* of whites with *nègresses*.”<sup>97</sup> The *Encyclopédie*’s definition of “mulâtre” points to the linguistic evolution of the term as it became a catch-all phrase for free people of color in metropolitan discourse. In the *Encyclopédie*, the *mulâtre* is defined by color—a mixture of white and black—and is assumed to be free.

Additionally, the *Encyclopédie* entry for “mulâtre” spreads the idea central to colonial discourse that *mulâtres* were a necessary intermediary social group. A footnote to the “mulâtre” entry notes that “one must admit that this disorder [racial mixing between whites and blacks] has resulted in some real advantages for our colonies.”<sup>98</sup> The extended footnote goes on to highlight the advantages that *mulâtres* bring to colonial society. Primarily, *mulâtres* offer a boon to the sheer number of the free population, and, as a result, “this class of *libres* is, without contradiction, at all times, the most sure support of the whites against the rebellion of the slaves.”<sup>99</sup> Reflecting the colonial conception of *mulâtres* as an intermediary group, the entry argues that “provided that they are well-off, they inspire in the *Nègres* the superiority of the whites ....”<sup>100</sup> The commentary on *mulâtres* in the *Encyclopédie* brings out several key components of the conceptual framework for imagining that group in metropolitan discourse during the

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<sup>97</sup> *Encyclopédie*, 496.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*



latter part of the eighteenth century. *Mulâtres* are defined primarily by color as a mixture of black (“noir”) and white, and they are assumed to be free and a vital part of maintaining slave society—both as an intermediary group that reaffirms the supremacy of whites and as a potential security force for the control of the slave population. Debbasch has successfully argued that the development of the segregationist legal order after 1750 was a response to the growth of free people of color as a numerical and economic rival to whites.<sup>101</sup> The lengthy entry on *mulâtres* in the *Encyclopédie* also indicates the increased visibility of free people of color and issues related to their standing in colonial society after mid-century.

As indicated by the *Encyclopédie*, colonial issues appear to occupy a larger role in public discourse after 1750, corresponding to the increasing importance of the colonial economy to French commerce. After 1750, several colonial jurists addressed the administration of the French Caribbean colonies, specifically Saint-Domingue, in hopes of influencing the policies adopted by the Ministry of the Navy, which held jurisdiction over colonial administration. As a result, these lobbying efforts increased awareness of colonial society and the role of free people of color in that society. The overall focus of these reflections on colonial society as they relate to free people of color is the need to maintain a color line between white and black with free people of color positioned as a necessary intermediary group.

The most important mid-century contribution to the dialogue on the administration of colonial society is Emilien Petit’s *Patriotisme américain*. A lawyer within the colonial administration, Petit advocated policies that he believed would help

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<sup>101</sup> Debbasch, *Couleur et liberté*, 93-104.

unite the colony of Saint-Domingue more closely to the metropole. Petit feared the growth of an “américain” patriotism that could break the colonial bonds with the metropole. Petit saw the white population as a group that would maintain the colony’s unity with France, and so in order to avoid a potential rupture with the metropole, he promoted policies that would encourage more whites to settle in Saint-Domingue and that would privilege whites over *affranchis* and *mulâtres*.

Petit deplors the fact that in cities and towns throughout Saint-Domingue “Nègres ou Mulâtres” find themselves fulfilling roles in the economy that otherwise “could employ *Blancs*.”<sup>102</sup> He also suggests attracting more white women to populate the colony, thereby avoiding sexual relationships between whites and blacks, which he asserts are “indecent, repulsive and dangerous in a country where the *Blanc* must always remain a respectable distance from everything that comes from the *Noir*.”<sup>103</sup> Finally, he notes “the necessity of maintaining in this sort of men [people of color] high esteem and respect for the *sang blanc*.”<sup>104</sup> Thus, Petit argues for the necessity of a strict color line between whites and people of color in order to promote a sense of French unity between the colony and the metropole. As historian John Garrigus observes, the discourse positioning free people of color as an intermediary group is part of the emerging definition of citizenship or belonging to civil society in racial terms<sup>105</sup>—a dramatic departure from the *Code Noir*, which simply delineated between two groups: slave and free.

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<sup>102</sup> Emilien Petit, *Le Patriotisme américain, ou Mémoires sur l'établissement de la partie française de l'Isle de Saint-Domingue, sous le vent de l'Amérique* (SN, 1750), 44.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 114.

<sup>105</sup> John Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in Saint-Domingue* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 149.

Along with Petit's *Patriotisme américain*, Hilliard d'Aubertueil's *Considérations sur Saint-Domingue* form the most important commentaries on colonial society by jurists to enter the public sphere of debate. Published in 1776, Aubertueil's *Considérations* fits into what Andrew Curran identifies as "the Era of Negrophilia" of the 1770s and 1780s. In contrast to earlier views of *nègres* that posited an inherent biological inferiority resulting from climate-induced degeneration, Aubertueil suggests that *nègres* only appear to have negative qualities because the condition of slavery has made them that way. Aubertueil's perspective derives from Raynal, who proposed a similar argument, and also from Rousseauian "state of nature" philosophy. Aubertueil reasons:

...It follows that *l'homme naturel* is more inclined to virtue, and that the most virtuous man of the civilized world is the one who is the most free; benevolence is the prerogative of liberty. ... It is therefore not shocking that *Nègres*, in becoming our slaves, contract an infinity of vices that they don't have in the state of nature ...<sup>106</sup>

Beyond suggesting that the "vices" of *nègres* are the fault of slavery rather than an inherent (and therefore natural) racial characteristic, Aubertueil further "humanizes" *nègres* by refuting their supposed lack of intelligence and wicked disposition. He argues that the "atrocious character" attributed to *nègres* derives from "ignorance and fear,"<sup>107</sup> and that "if *Nègres* were naturally wicked, one man would not be able to govern a hundred of them in a wooded area or in a remote mountain, as has been seen for a hundred years."<sup>108</sup> Aubertueil also notes that "They are not ... devoid of intelligence, and the writers who have assumed that they have limited faculties have judged them too

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<sup>106</sup> Hilliard d'Aubertueil, *Considérations sur l'état présent de la Colonie Française de Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1776), 130.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 137.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 139.

lightly.”<sup>109</sup> While Aubertueil humanizes *nègres* by refuting some of the worst stereotypes used to justify slavery, it should not be suggested that he is in any way anti-slavery. The overriding concern of *Considerations sur Saint-Domingue* is how to maintain the slave society. His humanization of *nègres* is part of a larger argument concerning the management of slaves, specifically that in order to maximize productivity and prevent a widespread slave rebellion masters should be encouraged to treat slaves “humanely.”

As part of his larger concern with maintaining the established social order of Saint-Domingue, Aubertueil comments extensively on the free people of color population of the colony. Aubertueil’s commentary reveals a greater variety of racist terminology than previously seen in metropolitan discourse and the perception that color prejudice was necessary for the maintenance of the slave regime. Aubertueil asserts that a stigma must be attached to anyone associated with the “race des Noirs.” He writes that “in Saint-Domingue, interest and security require that we overwhelm the race of *Noirs* with such great contempt, that whoever descends from them, until the sixth generation, is covered with an indelible stain.”<sup>110</sup> This prejudice against people of color required to maintain order in a slave society is not based on notions of the supposed inferiority of people of color—but rather color alone.

Aubertueil’s formulation of an “indelible stain” that lasts until the sixth generation of “whitening” reflects the colonial obsession with markers of color and subsequent racial categories derived from the nuances on a scale from white to black.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 73.

The complexity of the colonial social and racial landscape lent itself, in Aubertueil's view, to a troubling "confusion of ranks," and so he developed a new system to avoid such confusion. He comments favorably on the recent decree "prohibiting the *affranchis* and *gens de sang-mêlé* from taking the names of *Blancs*," but he goes farther, stating "it must be prohibited under severe penalties to *affranchis* and the daughters of *sang-mêlé* from marrying *Blancs*."<sup>111</sup> Recognizing that "illegitimate alliances" between whites and people of color would continue, Aubertueil concedes that upon reaching the sixth degree removed from *nègre* "where the most active discernment cannot find any difference [from whites]" legitimate intermarriage could occur.<sup>112</sup> In the process of summarizing his argument about marriage between whites and people of color, Aubertueil exposes his readers to the complex linguistic system employed in colonial society to categorize individuals by color: "...*Blanc* and *Nègresse*, first degree, *Mulâtresse*, second degree; *Tierceronne*, third degree; *Quarteronne*, fourth degree; *Mestive*, fifth degree; child of *Mestive*, sixth degree, reputed *Blanche*, and capable of marriage with a *Blanc*."<sup>113</sup>

In addition, to alleviate the "confusion of ranks" that he saw as a threat to the stability of the slavery regime, Aubertueil sought to simplify membership of the "classe intermédiaire" by limiting it to *mulâtres* and their children produced with whites. According to Aubertueil, the stability of the social order (premised on white supremacy of course) required that "this [intermediary] class be absolutely distinct from that of the slaves, by external and individual signs, such as civil rights. It requires that this class be

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 80-81.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 95-96.

*jaune*, this is to say, entirely composed of *Mulâtres*.”<sup>114</sup> The corollary to this proposal was that “in the future all *Nègres*, *Griffes*, and *Marabous* remain in slavery.”<sup>115</sup> In a footnote, Aubertueil explains to his readers who are presumably not intimately familiar with the racist terminology of colonial society that a *Griffe* is the offspring of a “*Mulâtre*” and a “*Nègresse*” and that a *Marabou* is the offspring of a “*Grif*” and a “*Nègresse*.”<sup>116</sup> The advantage of Aubertueil’s proposal is that “by these means the confusion of classes will be the least possible, the honor of the *Blancs*, their superiority over the slaves and *affranchis*, will find itself conserved, and good order reestablished forever between one another.”<sup>117</sup>

Aubertueil’s *Considerations sur Saint-Domingue* points to the complexity of the language of race developed in colonial society. Aubertueil employs a greater variety of racist terms than typically used to conceptualize and discuss free people of color. Aubertueil’s language of race ranges from the standards “*mulâtre*” and “*nègre libre*” to more specialized and lesser known (as seen by Aubertueil’s need to define them for his audience) terms such as, “*griffe*,” “*marabou*,” “*quarteron*,” and “*mestive*.” In addition to these terms used to isolate specific nuances or gradations, Aubertueil uses the generic catch-all term “*sang-mêlés*.” The greater diversity of racist language in public discourse signals the evolution of the free colored population and the shaping of language to describe the complexity of the social landscape. During the latter part of the eighteenth century, free people of color became an increasingly scrutinized and visible

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 96.

element of public discourse, which resulted in a complex racialist vocabulary providing a conceptual framework to give meaning to the complex race-based social relationships of the colonial world. As free people of color developed as social and economic rivals to whites in the decades preceding the French Revolution, public discourse reveals a desperate attempt to draw the color line and enforce white supremacy to prevent the “confusion of ranks.”

Public discourse provided an arena within the public sphere for the vigorous debate of issues relating to colonial society and the role of free people of color in that society. Pierre Ulric Dubuisson’s *Nouvelles considerations sur Saint-Domingue*, a direct response to Aubertueil’s *Considerations*, provides an example of the dramatic exchanges over slavery and people of color in the public sphere during the decade preceding the Revolution. Dubuisson disagrees with Aubertueil on most issues, specifically Aubertueil’s proposals regarding limiting the right of slave owners and whites to free slaves and intermarry with people of color. Dubuisson’s primary objection to Aubertueil’s proposals is that they take liberties or prerogatives away from whites as masters. In Dubuisson’s view, prohibiting *affranchissements*, for instance, curtails the absolute power of masters over their slaves. He also argues that being able to free slaves in return for loyal service encourages other slaves “to be good subjects.” Thus, Dubuisson argues that *affranchissements* provide whites with more control over the slave population.<sup>118</sup>

Dubuisson is also critical of Aubertueil’s suggestion that all *mulâtres* be freed from birth, and that *griffes* and *marabous* be destined for slavery. Dubuisson points out

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<sup>118</sup> Pierre Ulric Dubuisson, *Nouvelles considerations sur Saint-Domingue, en réponse à celles de M.H.D.* (Paris, 1780), 72-78.

an inconsistency in Aubertueil's proposed system for recreating Saint-Domingue's "intermediary class." He notes that Aubertueil argues *nègres*, *griffes*, and *marabouts* should remain in slavery and all *mulâtres* should be freed from slavery and married to *nègres libres*, which are incompatible proposals because the children of the *mulâtres* and *nègres libres*, as Dubuisson observes, would be *griffes* and, therefore, slaves in Aubertueil's system.<sup>119</sup> Through his critique of Aubertueil, Dubuisson contributed to the transfer of colonial racialist language to metropolitan discourse, helping to shape the Old Regime language of race that would be challenged during the Revolution. An actor and playwright during the Revolution, Dubuisson was familiar with colonial society and its complex racialist system as a result of his experience as an administrator in Saint-Domingue during the 1770s. His commentary highlights the extreme difficulty of crafting an all-encompassing legal system for a colonial world that distinguished between so many different groups and categories. The debates about colonial society opened up during the revolutionary period challenged the linguistic system that developed under the Old Regime to assign social meaning to every conceivable racial group, resulting in negotiations over how to define groups and their relationship to one another. In short, revolutionary rhetoric ultimately challenged a discursive and legal system worked out over a century of evolution by saying all men are free and equal in rights—Gradations and nuances between *griffes*, *mulâtres*, etc. were no longer appropriate for conceptualizing social relationships.

Additional evidence of the infiltration of the complex colonial linguistic system used to categorize people of color in metropolitan discourse is found in a landmark piece

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 60.



of legislation from 1777, the *Police des Noirs*. As discussed earlier, the 1716 *Edit du roi* and the 1738 *Declaration du roi* limiting the entry of slaves into France contained language that combined both race and status. For instance, the articles of both these laws consistently used “Nègres Esclaves” to refer to the targets of their regulations. However, the third iteration of this legislation, the *Police des Noirs*, marks a substantial shift in the language of race used in metropolitan legal discourse. Rather than identifying the targets of the law by their civil status, the *Police des Noirs* focuses on color alone. Article I of the *Police des Noirs* states, “We make expressly prohibited to all of our Subjects, ..., of bringing into our Kingdom ... any *Noir*, *Mulâtre*, or other *Gens de couleur* of either sex, and of retaining them there in their service ....”<sup>120</sup> Moreover, article II prohibits “likewise ... all *Noirs*, *Mulâtres*, or other *Gens de couleur* of either sex, who are not in service, of entering our Kingdom in the future, under whatever cause and pretext that it may be.”<sup>121</sup> A couple of points stand out about the language used in the text quoted here. First, this is the first instance of a law issued by the metropole that makes reference to “Mulâtres” and “Gens de couleur,” indicating that the language of race circulating in the colonies had infiltrated metropolitan discourse as well. Secondly, the language of the *Police des Noirs* focuses on color rather than civil status. The focus on color rather than status represents a dramatic shift compared to previous laws issued in France. By attempting to limit the presence of people of color whether slave or free, the *Police des Noirs* clearly goes far beyond the concern over “Nègres Esclaves” of the regulations from 1716 and 1738. Thus, the language of race used in the *Police des Noirs* indicates heightened metropolitan racial

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<sup>120</sup> *Déclaration du roi, pour la police des noirs. Donné à Versailles le neuf Août 1777* (Paris, 1777), 4.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

anxieties, as the scope of the law expanded beyond just slaves to include all people of color.<sup>122</sup>

The justification for the severe prohibitions of the *Police des Noirs* also exposes the extent of French racial anxieties toward the later part of the eighteenth century. An ordinance issued by the Ministry of the Navy that served as the basis for the actual *Police des Noirs* provides a glimpse into the mindset that led to the law targeting all people of color and limiting their entry into France. The ordinance states that “the introduction of this species of men, of which the number and the quality of blood, as well as the nuance of color, can only corrupt the uniformity of the inhabitants of this Kingdom.”<sup>123</sup> The reasoning given here for the *Police des Noirs* is based on racist thinking. Within the discourse of metropolitan law, color had become a marker of degraded racial character, and the purpose of the law became to protect an imagined French racial purity from being tainted by limiting the presence of people of color in France. Thus, the language of race within end of the century metropolitan legal codes reveals heightened racial anxieties and an irrational fear of color-mixing due to the supposed damage to French racial purity. As historian Sue Peabody has pointed out, though, the *Police des Noirs* was never strictly enforced and likely only reflected the concerns of a vocal minority in the French government.<sup>124</sup>

Overall, a more complex language of race based on the color of an individual rather than civil status developed within French legal discourse over the course of the eighteenth century. In response to the growth of a free colored population, language

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<sup>122</sup> Peabody, “*There Are No Slaves in France*”, 125.

<sup>123</sup> *Ordonnance de l’Amirauté de France ... Du 16 Avril 1777* (Paris, 1777), 2.

<sup>124</sup> Peabody, “*There Are No Slaves in France*”, 125.

developed that combined both race and status in order to distinguish between references to free people of color and slaves. However, color became the primary marker of importance, and language inundated with racialist thinking emerged that saw people of color as having a degraded racial character, thereby posing a threat to an imagined French purity.

The racialist social order supported by the colonial language of race came under increased scrutiny in the 1780s, which increased the visibility of free people of color and the prejudice against them in metropolitan discourse. In 1785, a wealthy free man of color from Saint-Domingue named Julien Raimond lobbied the Naval Ministry to reform the segregationist legal system in the colonies by royal decree. In several unpublished memoranda to the king's ministers, Raimond represented the property-owning class of free people of color in Saint-Domingue as "industrious, supportive of slavery, and devoted to colonial defense."<sup>125</sup> In describing free people of color as the "guarantors of a stable slave system," Raimond quite clearly saw the reform of racial prejudice against his group as a way to protect slavery rather than challenge it. In fact, he did not want to eliminate the racist laws against free people of color entirely, rather he proposed granting "wealthy, light-skinned, and legitimately born men of color" the "status of 'new whites.'" No longer the target of racial discrimination as "new whites," this group would intermarry with whites producing positive social and economic benefits for the colony.<sup>126</sup> A colonial reform committee established by the Naval Ministry was sympathetic to Raimond's ideas and it forwarded his complaints to the Count de La Luzerne, the royal governor of Saint-Domingue. La Luzerne, though, dismissed Raimond's petitions, and,

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<sup>125</sup> Garrigus, "Opportunist or Patriot?" *Slavery and Abolition* Vol. 28, No. 1 (April 2007), 5.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

in 1787, he became Naval Secretary himself. Raimond's lobbying efforts stalled as a result until the start of the French Revolution.<sup>127</sup>

Published in 1785, Abbé Raynal's *Essai sur l'administration de Saint-Domingue* discusses the problem of colonial prejudice against free people of color and sheds light on how conceptions of colonial society were woven into the metropolitan frame of reference. Raynal informs his readership that "nègres et mulâtres libres" cannot be compared with the "peasantry of Europe" because "servitude and that which is necessary to maintain it has marked an immense distance between *l'homme blanc* and *l'homme noir*."<sup>128</sup> However, Raynal suggests that prejudice against free people of color is arbitrary and could be "without inconvenience modified according to circumstances."<sup>129</sup> He cites the example of "Louis, nègre libre du Cap" as an example of someone who "though he is *noir*" deserves more social recognition and honor than "the lazy *blanc* who begs for his bread at the corner of the street."<sup>130</sup>

Raynal's *Essai* suggests a softening of the segregationist system that attached an "indelible stain" to all people of color, thereby placing the poorest whites above the richest "gens de couleur libres." In his view, successful and well-deserving free people of color should occupy a higher social standing than *petits blancs*. Raynal does not suggest that the colonial social order premised on white supremacy should be completely overturned, but rather that the claims for civil and political equality made by individuals such as Julien Raimond should be acknowledged and accommodated. At the same time, though, he proposes that the "gens de couleur libres" can be divided into three classes:

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>128</sup> Guillaume Thomas Raynal, *Essai sur l'administration de Saint-Domingue* (SN, 1785), 37.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 38.

“landowners, artisans, [and] vagabonds.” Free people of color deemed vagabonds should be removed from the cities and towns and forced to labor for wages under “planters and the rich men of their color” as a public service.<sup>131</sup> Raynal asserts that “there is no other way so that this multitude of free men will not become more and more in charge of the colony.”<sup>132</sup> Overall, Raynal concerns himself with maintaining the *status quo* of slavery and white supremacy in the social, economic, and political realms, but he nevertheless shows his willingness to modify the prejudice against people of color. Perhaps this move toward the softening of racial prejudice against wealthy men of color is a result of the lobbying efforts of figures such as Julien Raimond--Regardless it points to the increased visibility of free people of color and the increased scrutiny and criticism of colonial society in metropolitan discourse during the decade prior to the Revolution.

Although published in 1797, Moreau de Saint-Méry’s massive *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l’Isle de Saint-Domingue* provides a snapshot of colonial society on the eve of the Revolution. Saint-Méry describes the population of Saint-Domingue and the different regions of the colony in meticulous detail based on years of observation—first drafting the *Description* in 1789—prior to the revolutionary upheaval that changed everything he had known about Saint-Domingue. By 1797 the French National Assembly had abolished slavery and Toussaint Louverture, a former slave who became a general in the French army, had become the most powerful political figure in Saint-Domingue, so the colonial society depicted in Saint-Méry’s *Description* no longer existed by the time of its publication. In

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 41.

essence, the *Description topographique* reflects a desire to restore the Old Regime society pictured by Saint-Méry, and it provides excellent insight into his era's racialist thought.

In his categorization and analysis of the colonial population, Saint-Méry supports a biopolitics of race premised on the social and political supremacy of "whites." In Saint-Méry's formulation, "blancs" represent one of the two "pure" racial groups in colonial society—the other being "nègres." All other racial classification groups determined by "the nuance of the skin" are created through the "mixture" of whites and people of color.<sup>133</sup> Saint-Méry's analysis of racial mixing reveals much about his understanding of the functioning of race. He says that a "Blanc" and a "femme non-blanche" can never produce "un Blanc," just as a "nègre" and a "femme colorée" can never produce "a new individual who descends to a *nègre*."<sup>134</sup> In other words, "*Blancs* mixed between themselves can only produce *Blancs* and *nègres* can only produce *nègres* of both sexes."<sup>135</sup> Here, *Blancs* and *nègres* serve as more than just linguistic reference points for groups in colonial society. These two racial groups have significance as abstracted forms with an essential nature or quality embedded with value judgments.

All of the mixtures between whites and *nègres* fall into the broad category of "affranchis." Saint-Méry comments that the "affranchis" offer "a great variety of nuances from their mixture with *Blancs*, avec les *nègres* and between themselves." The nuanced color of the "affranchis" ranges between two extremes: "on one side the *nègres* and on the other individuals of whose color does not show any sensible difference when

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<sup>133</sup> Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'Isle de Saint-Domingue ...*, Tome Première (Philadelphia, 1797), 75.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

compared to that of the *Blanc*.”<sup>136</sup> Again, the racial categories of “nègre” and “blanc” are perceived as essential categories, so that even if an individual *appears* totally black or white, they are not inherently one or the other “pure” races but another racial category altogether. Saint-Méry tells us that “affranchis” are “universally known by the name of *Gens de couleur* or *Sang-mêlés* ...,”<sup>137</sup> but individuals are referred to specifically by one of the thirteen racial classification groups. Saint-Méry divides the *gens de couleur* up into a dizzying array of classifications, including *griffe*, *sacatra*, *marabou*, *mulâtre*, *quarteron*, *métis*, *mamelouc*, *quarteronné*, and *sang-mêlé*. Saint-Méry notes that “it takes well-trained eyes in order to distinguish [*quarteronné* and *sang-mêlé*] from pure *Blancs* ...”<sup>138</sup> The fact that it takes “well-trained eyes” to recognize any noticeable difference between some of the nuanced categories underlines the ludicrous nature of the racial classification system devised in colonial society as part of maintaining white supremacy.

Saint-Méry sought to delineate between each racial group with mathematical precision based on the ratio of “white blood” to “black blood” allowed for each nuance. As a result, he presents his readers with several pages of tables illustrating the minimum and maximum range for “parts *blanc*” for each group, concluding that “one must always deem *nègre* those who do not have at least eight *parties du blanc*.”<sup>139</sup> In his quest to empirically and mathematically categorize racial groups, Saint-Méry epitomizes not only the colonial obsession with color, but also the contribution of Enlightenment methodologies to racialist thought. Saint-Méry approaches the issue of race with the

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 86.

rigor of a scientific enterprise, which illuminates the connection between modern racism and the Enlightenment drive to categorize and impose order on nature. In many ways, Moreau de Saint-Méry was a complex Enlightenment figure<sup>140</sup>—a scientifically-minded thinker, naturalist, and slave owner turned revolutionary-era statesman. Saint-Méry was a member of the colonial scientific society, the Cercle de Philadelphes, as well as the American Philosophical Society founded by Benjamin Franklin.<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, the biopolitics of race inherent in Saint-Méry’s formulation supported prejudice and the segregationist legal order by giving meaning and validity to the effort to classify people by color.

Interestingly, Saint-Méry’s characterization of specific individuals undermines the racialist biopolitics supported by the racial classification scheme he painstakingly outlines. In his *Description*, Saint-Méry gives an overview of each parish and some of the notable inhabitants from each, and in the process, he discusses the good character of several free people of color who made important contributions to colonial society. For instance, in discussing the charitable works of the “Cottin widow” from Le Cap, Saint-Méry remarks that “this *mulâtresse* has always silenced the prejudice of color and birth by her virtues.”<sup>142</sup> The *Description* also contains a six-page profile of Jean Jasmin, who built a hospice for poor *gens de couleur libres*. Saint-Méry provides some basic biographical information on Jean Jasmin, while also recounting his charitable works and highlighting his virtuous character in great detail. Jean Jasmin was born Aloou Kinson in

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<sup>140</sup> Taffin, Dominique, ed. *Moreau de Saint-Méry ou les ambiguïtés d’un créole des Lumières*. (Martinique, 2006)

<sup>141</sup> James McClellan, *Colonialism and Science: Saint-Domingue and the Old Regime* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 227.

<sup>142</sup> Saint-Méry, *Description*, 394.



Africa and subsequently sold into slavery in le Cap to a mason. Jasmin was freed in 1741 in return for loyal and outstanding service as a builder.<sup>143</sup> Informed by Saint-Méry of his merit, the Cercle des Philadelphes sought to honor Jasmin for years of charitable work in the community, which was ultimately blocked due to the discrimination against people of color. Saint-Méry laments the lack of recognition given to Jasmin, exclaiming:

Virtuous Jasmin! ... If the witnesses of your efforts are for the most part insensitive to them; if prejudices, with which your works have nothing in common, do not permit that they value you for all that you are worth, console yourself; a voice devoted to the truth, to the panegyric of the good and the blame of the wicked, has published your virtues ... and public censure will be the share of all those who, incapable of imitating you, have said that rewarding your benevolence would threaten the political state of the Colony ...<sup>144</sup>

Saint-Méry's outrage at the discrimination lobbied at Jasmin is one of several examples where he notes that the individual character of free people of color undermines the prejudice against them. In discussing the South Province, Saint-Méry cites the exceptional hospitality shown to travelers passing through by the plantation owner "Lasneau, mulâtre libre." Saint-Méry comments that "men such as Lasneau denounce with rigor prejudice which does not ever permit them, neither their descendents, the hope of merging with those of whom a noble and generous hospitality, and conduct esteemed by the whole world, brings them nearer constantly."<sup>145</sup> Saint-Méry's favorable portrait of many people of color and his denunciation of discrimination against them as individuals may point to a softening of the segregationist system in Saint-Domingue. Saint-Méry's own encounter with the free people of color he wrote about occurred during his effort to recruit free men of color for the Savannah expedition of 1779 during the American War

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 416-417.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 421-422.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 793.

for Independence. The free men of color recruited for the expedition hoped that their service would lead to greater recognition in Saint-Domingue, and they used the experience to form the nucleus of the free colored political movement that would emerge during the French Revolution. Many of the most prominent free colored leaders during the Revolution, such as Pierre Pinchinat, Louis-Jacques Bauvais, and André Rigaud, were part of the Savannah expedition.<sup>146</sup> During the 1780s, the French Naval Ministry seriously considered the arguments made by free people of color such as Julien Raimond and encouraged colonial administrators to work toward ameliorating their condition.<sup>147</sup> Overall, though, while Saint-Méry undermines the discriminatory racialist system with his sketches of individual people of color, he maintains the racialist language that is foundational to the politics of difference and the ultimate discrimination against those who are categorized as *gens de couleur*.

This chapter has shown that the French language of race originally borrowed from the Spanish colonial context. The early reliance on Spanish meanings for racialist terms points to the relative invisibility of French colonial society and related issues in metropolitan discourse at the end of the seventeenth century. As colonial society grew in economic importance and social complexity, the language of race became a more prominent part of metropolitan discourse and legal discourse. With the increased visibility of colonial society, French Enlightenment *philosophes* drew on observations of the French Caribbean by colonial figures such as Labat and Charlevoix to inform their own commentaries on race and slavery. With the continued growth of the free people of

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<sup>146</sup> On the Savannah expedition, see Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 207-213, and King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 65-69.

<sup>147</sup> Garrigus, "Opportunist or Patriot?", 5-6.

color population, especially in Saint-Domingue, the social position of people of African descent came under increased scrutiny in metropolitan and legal discourse, which brought the colonial racialist discursive system into the metropolitan frame of reference. In 1789, the French language of race found in metropolitan and legal discourse formed a frame of reference that validated slavery and segregationist colonial power structures by interpreting physical difference as a basis for exclusion. As the observations made by Moreau de Saint-Méry while recruiting for the Savannah expedition in 1779 indicate, though, the representation of free people of color depended on whether they were seen as a threat to white supremacy or as a means of defending it. Both attitudes could be found in the colonial language of race, and the French Revolution would bring the questions surrounding free people of color to the center of the debate on the colonies. As opposed to the colonial era where public discussions about free people of color were dominated by whites, the French Revolution created a new discursive situation that would allow free men of color to speak for themselves and to influence the public language of race.

### Chapter Three: The French Revolution and the Language of Race from 1789 to the May 15, 1791 Law

In a speech delivered July 29, 1789 before the Electors of Paris, Moreau de Saint-Méry, now a colonial deputy representing Martinique, declared: “Electors of Paris, citizens, Frenchmen! The glorious epoch is now arrived, when France quits her chains, emerges from her darkness, and is warmed to animation, by the bright beams of the Sun of Liberty.”<sup>148</sup> The excitement and optimism captured by Saint-Méry in his speech to the Electors of Paris was shared by many who saw the calling of the Estates General and the subsequent revolutionary movement as a chance to regenerate a nation saddled by the despotism of the ‘Old Regime.’ While Saint-Méry ironically announced that “. . . we have yet been Slaves—but even then were Patriots,”<sup>149</sup> colonial deputies such as himself were undoubtedly driven to protect the trade interests of their respective colonies, especially slavery and the slave trade. Saint-Méry’s invocation of the plight of slaves in the above quote highlights the fact that the deputies sent to represent the colonies did not in fact represent the interests of everyone in the colonial world. They certainly did not represent the interests of the slave population, nor did they even represent the interests of the free population of African descent. Free people of color, however, would engage in their own lobbying campaign to gain recognition of their political rights.

When the French Revolution began, free people of color in the French colonies suffered under a segregationist legal order that excluded them from equal participation in civic and political life. Colonial whites ardently maintained that free people of color

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<sup>148</sup> Moreau de Saint-Méry, *The Speech of M. Moreau de St. Méry, Spoken in the Assembly of the Electors of Paris, July 29, 1789* (London, 1790), 3.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

were a necessary intermediary class between slave and free and that any attack on the racial prejudice against them would bring down the entire slave system. Advocates for political equality for free people of color had to counter a discourse about their position in colonial society that had been advanced for at least half a century.<sup>150</sup> A crucial part of the lobbying campaign of free people of color became to define their group and to disassociate support for their rights from support for abolition. In order to sway metropolitan public opinion in their favor, advocates for free people of color drew on contemporary notions of active and passive citizenship and presented their group as consisting overwhelmingly of free-born individuals with mixed European and African ancestry who owned plantations and slaves and were critical elements of colonial prosperity. As part of this effort, the language and rhetoric used by lobbyists for free people of color had the effect of privileging the story of wealthy *hommes de couleur* while overshadowing the presence of *nègres libres*, advancing a discourse that simultaneously embraced egalitarianism while reflecting traditional colonial prejudices against free blacks. This definition of the situation was embraced by the National Assembly's May 15, 1791 law, which enfranchised free people of color born to free parents—effectively granting rights to some *hommes de couleur* several generations removed from slavery and maintaining *nègres libres* as an intermediary class. By excluding individuals based on the legal status of their parents rather than the color of their skin, the May 15 law represents an effort to incorporate the egalitarian principles of

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<sup>150</sup> See John Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) for the best treatment of the increasing level of discrimination against free people of color over the eighteenth century.

the revolution into French laws regarding the colonies while also maintaining traditional colonial power structures.

From the earliest debates about colonial representation in the National Assembly, it appears that many French politicians did not have a firm grasp of the complexity of the social landscape in the Caribbean. For instance, in a pamphlet from June 1789 challenging the legitimacy of the deputies from Saint-Domingue, the philosopher and politician marquis de Condorcet noted that “*le noirs libres* have not been called to the election of the deputies, ...; therefore the deputies from the colonies cannot be admitted, since they are not the representatives of these new provinces, but only the agents of a class of citizens.”<sup>151</sup> While Condorcet recognized that whites did not represent all free people in the colonies, his use of the term *noirs libres* to refer to all free people of color is unusual, and indicates that at this early stage prior to intensive lobbying campaigns undertaken by the advocates for free people of color, metropolitan observers, even the Amis des Noirs to which Condorcet belonged, failed to clearly sense the racialist categories dividing the colony.

In September 1789, emboldened by France’s embrace of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, advocates for free people of color attempted to position themselves more clearly in public debate, as their cause “was all but unknown in France” and in many cases it was conflated with abolitionism.<sup>152</sup> At first, free men of color in Paris tried to gain the cooperation of the Club Massiac, a colonial pressure group consisting of

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<sup>151</sup> Condorcet, *Sur l’admission des députés des planteurs de Saint-Domingue, dans l’Assemblée Nationale*. Extrait des *Oeuvres complètes de Condorcet*, Brunswick et Paris, 1804, tome XVI. In *La révolution française et l’abolition de l’esclavage*, vol. 6., 162.

<sup>152</sup> David Geggus, “Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession during the Constituent Assembly,” *The American Historical Review* Vol. 94, No. 5 (Dec. 1989), 1296.

absentee planters residing in Paris. Vincent Ogé, a wealthy free colored merchant from Cap-Français, gave a speech to the Club Massiac on September 7 that called for colonial whites to embrace political equality for free non-whites. Ogé did not help his case to the white planters by announcing rather provocatively that it was his belief that liberty should be given to “tous les hommes.”<sup>153</sup> The club, however, saw little advantage in challenging the system of racial discrimination that most white colonists viewed as vital to maintaining slavery. After being rebuffed by the Club Massiac, Ogé began meeting with a group of free men of color calling themselves the Colons Américains, which held regular meetings at the office of Parisian lawyer Etienne De Joly.<sup>154</sup>

The Colons Américains understood the importance of positioning themselves in the debate over political rights and framing the situation for the French public and National Assembly. Hence, in an address to the Club Massiac made in September 1789, the Colons Américains placed themselves on a completely equal footing with the white planters, referring to the whites as “their fellow countrymen, their Brothers, their Friends.”<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, by referring to themselves as “Citoyens de Couleur,” the Colons Américains were positioning their group as citizens entitled to the rights for which they were making claim.

In their *cahier de doléances* issued on September 22, the Colons Américains embraced equality for all free non-whites in the colonies. In addition to stating the

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<sup>153</sup> Vincent Ogé, *Motion faite par M. Vincent Ogé, jeune à l'Assemblée des Colons, Habitans de S.-Domingue, à l'Hôtel de Massiac, Place des Victoires* (Paris, 1789) in *La Revolution française et l'abolition de l'esclavage*, vol. 11, 5.

<sup>154</sup> John D. Garrigus, “‘Thy coming fame, Ogé! Is sure’: New Evidence on Ogé’s 1790 Revolt and the Beginnings of the Haitian Revolution” in *Assumed Identities: The Meanings of Race in the Atlantic World*, John D. Garrigus and Christopher Morris, eds. (University of Texas at Arlington, 2010), 27.

<sup>155</sup> *Extrait du procès-verbal de l'Assemblée des citoyens-libres et propriétaires de couleur des Isles et Colonies Françaises, constituée sous le titre de Colons Américains*, (22 Sept. 1789), 8.

grievances of free people of color, the *cahier* attempted to clarify their position in colonial society. The Colons Américains noted that there are two fundamental classes in the colonies: “hommes libres” and slaves. However, within “la classe d’hommes libres,” there existed “not only all the whites, but also all of the Creoles of color, such as *Nègres libres*, *Mulâtres*, *Quarterons*, and others.”<sup>156</sup> Thus, the initial advocacy of the free colored lobby not only advanced specific reforms to address the social injustice of racial discrimination, but also framed the situation in the colonies for metropolitan audiences to ensure that public opinion would not regard support for free people of color as an attack on slavery.

Generally, the Colons Américains included all free non-whites under the umbrella term “citoyens de couleur” in order to downplay any race or class divisions within the free colored population, which represents a rhetorical strategy to support the argument that the Colons Américains spoke for all free people of color in the colonies. However, after Julien Raimond, a free colored planter from Saint-Domingue and the most influential advocate for free men of color, joined the group in October 1789, the rhetoric of the Colons Américains began to place more emphasis on the injustice toward free people of mixed European and African ancestry.<sup>157</sup> In an October 1789 pamphlet published in support of the Colons Américains’ hearing with the National Assembly’s Committee on Verification, they defined their group as the “Colons Américains, known in the islands under the name *Mulâtres*, *Quarterons*, etc.”<sup>158</sup> While not explicitly

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<sup>156</sup> *Cahier, contenant les Plaintes, Doléances et Réclamations des Citoyens-libres et Propriétaires de Couleur, des Isles et Colonies Françaises* (Paris, 1789), 1.

<sup>157</sup> David Geggus, “Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession during the Constituent Assembly,” 1297-98.

<sup>158</sup> *Adresse à l’assemblée nationale, pour les Citoyens-libres de Couleur, des Isles et Colonies Françaises, 12 Octobre 1789* (Paris, 1789), 1.



excluding *nègres libres*, the language of the Colons' advocacy certainly silences the injustice toward them and makes their significant presence in colonial society invisible. Historian David Geggus suggests that placing the focus on *hommes de couleur* and overshadowing the important presence of *nègres libres* was a rhetorical strategy calculated to provide "the best chance of overcoming opposition and persuading the French to think of colonial non-whites as their fellow citizens."<sup>159</sup> The language used by the Colons Américains in their publications, thus, attempted to position free people of African and European ancestry as the primary focus—reflecting colonial prejudices against free blacks and a rhetorical strategy highlighting the European heritage of free coloreds as a basis for political inclusion.

Language that minimized the presence of *nègres libres* was also used by one of the most influential metropolitan lobbyists for free people of color, the abbé Grégoire. In addition to serving as a deputy to the National Assembly, the abbé Grégoire sat on the influential Committee on Verification, and he supported the request of the Colons Américains to have deputies admitted directly to the assembly. His perspective on the questions surrounding free people of color was heavily influenced by Raimond, as seen in the pamphlet that he wrote in October 1789 in support of the free people of color's hearing with the verification committee. In his *Mémoire en faveur des gens de couleur*, the abbé Grégoire wrote about race as a superficial marker that was nothing more than a pretext for whites to maintain an unjust privilege over those deemed non-white. He wrote:

... the Whites having the force, have pronounced, against justice, that a darkened skin excludes someone from the advantages of society. Prided by their tint, they

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<sup>159</sup> Geggus, "Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession during the Constituent Assembly," 1299.

have elevated a dividing wall between themselves and a class of free men, who are improperly called *gens de couleur* or *sang-mêlés*.<sup>160</sup>

Grégoire uses racist language simply to distinguish between the two groups for rhetorical purposes, but he makes the argument that distinctions of color have no real meaning. Colonial society possessed a rigid racial classification scheme that categorized individuals based on color and descent. The language used by Grégoire, however, implied that color was simply a superficial marker and that once free from slavery all men of color were on an equal level regardless of their distance from slavery or degree of African ancestry.

Grégoire acknowledged the usage of various racial classification terms in colonial society, noting that notaries in the colonies were forced “to record in their acts the qualifications of *mulâtres libres*, *carterons libres*, *sang-mêlés*, etc.”<sup>161</sup> However, he maintains that those qualifications serve no practical purpose as it is impossible to confuse free and slave; thus, the only purpose of those qualifications is to subordinate “individuals whose only crime is having skin nuanced differently.”<sup>162</sup> The colonial racial classification scheme made its way into the metropolitan public discourse on race as writers such as Grégoire cited the racial qualifiers as evidence of the prejudice against free people of color; however, while Grégoire used racist language simply to distinguish between whites and people of color for rhetorical purposes, making the argument that distinctions of color have no real meaning, his pamphlet, nevertheless,

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<sup>160</sup> Abbé Grégoire, *Mémoire en faveur des gens de couleur ou sang-mêlés de St.-Domingue et des autres îles françoises de l'Amérique, adressé à l'Assemblée Nationale* (Paris, 1789), 4.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*, 7-8.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

defined free people of color as a group of mixed-race individuals, marginalizing free blacks.

Meanwhile, pro-colonial writers attempted to undermine the rhetoric about free people of color created by their advocates in Paris by emphasizing the race and class divisions among them. The most blatant apology for colonial race prejudice came from an anonymous author in response to Grégoire's *Mémoire en faveur*.<sup>163</sup> The language of race invoked in the response clearly highlights the gap between competing discourses and reveals the key characteristics of the discourse injected into metropolitan debate by writers for the colonial deputies. The language of the opponents of colonial race prejudice used terms such as "gens de couleur" or "hommes de couleur" in order to distance free people of color from a connection to a slave heritage and to downplay any divisions within the group itself. The discourse of advocates for free people of color tended to homogenize the group by avoiding any reference to the multitude of terms from the colonial classification scheme. The language in the response to Grégoire's *Mémoire en faveur*, however, emphasizes the connection of people of color to a slave heritage and justifies white racial prejudices by citing the discrimination within the free colored group itself, thereby undermining the metropolitan discourse that tended to cast free people of color as a homogeneous group.

In his apology for discrimination against free people of color in various arenas of colonial society, the anonymous author responding to Grégoire portrays the free people of color population as having a close connection to slavery and uses the slave ancestry of

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<sup>163</sup> Florence Gauthier attributes the anonymous *Observations d'un habitant des colonies* to Moreau de Saint-Méry. Florence Gauthier, *L'aristocratie de l'épiderme: Le combat des la Société des Citoyens de Couleur, 1789-91* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2007), 101.

the group to justify social discrimination. Specifically, in the course of defending the prohibition against people of color practicing medicine, he claimed that “*les hommes de couleur* have difficulty refusing slaves, with which the bonds of kinship unite them ... .”<sup>164</sup> Here the author argues that free people of color cannot practice medicine because “bonds of kinship” tie them to the primitive practices of slaves, which in turn removes them from the modernity of science and medicine. The author ignores the fact that many free people of color received education in France and implies that all free people of color, sharing familial bonds with slaves, lack the “modern” and “rational” qualities of whites. Moreover, he justifies the exclusion of people of color from public office, saying that “it is not possible that those who were yesterday in slavery be today in the highest ranks of society, charged with positions that presume education, mores, and the general trust.”<sup>165</sup> The language used in this pamphlet positioned free people of color in metropolitan debates as a group consisting of individuals only recently removed from slavery and lacking the education and background to act as full citizens.

The anonymous pamphleteer responding to Grégoire also injected the language of the colonial color hierarchy into metropolitan discourse in his defense of the colonial practice of applying racial qualifiers to individuals of color in the notarial records. While Grégoire had resoundingly critiqued the practice as having no other purpose than to perpetuate racial prejudice, Grégoire’s opponent justifies the qualifiers as a necessary part of maintaining order in a slave society by preventing individuals from “usurping a civil

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<sup>164</sup> Anonymous, *Observations d’un habitant des colonies, sur le Mémoire en faveur des Gens de Couleur, ou Sang-Mêlés, de Saint-Domingue et des autres Iles Francoises de l’Amérique, adressé à l’Assemblée Nationale, par M. Grégoire, Curé d’Emberménil, Député de Lorraine* (Paris, 1789), 8.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

state that they have not legally acquired.”<sup>166</sup> However, what is interesting about the author’s defense of the colonial racial classification system is that he maintains the racial qualifiers are supported by prejudice within the free population of color itself. He writes:

As for the distinctions *Mulâtre libre*, *Quarteron libre*, etc etc, they come from the self-pride of those to which they belong. If M. Grégoire was the priest of a parish in the colonies, and he were to say to a *Quarteron libre*, in marrying him, that he was only a *Mulâtre libre*, he would quickly see that this colored hierarchy also has its principles in pride as all the others.<sup>167</sup>

The author of this quote goes on to provide other examples to convince his metropolitan audience that color prejudice and discrimination were not exclusive to the white population of Saint-Domingue. In speaking about the ordinance requiring free people of color to receive the permission of local authorities to host dances, the author cites the jealousies and rivalries within the free people of color community as the reason for the requirement. He notes that “in many colonies and notably in Saint-Domingue, *les Nègres libres* are not admitted by *les Affranchis* of other nuances to their balls,” which results in fighting and rivalries over women.<sup>168</sup> Ultimately, this critic’s point is that “prejudice of color ... does not belong to whites only .... Thus, a kind of pride which increases in measure as the nuance weakens tends to give a new force to this prejudice, which is the hidden spring of the entire colonial machine. Prejudice can be softened, but not annihilated ....”<sup>169</sup> The author ignores the fact that prejudice is an artificial product of unequal power relations based on color in the first place and justifies racial prejudice as

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 21-22.

natural by placing the focus of the discussion about race on divisions within the free population of color.

A provocative pamphlet from November 1789 titled *Réclamations des Nègres libres, Colons Américains* also emphasized race and class divisions among free people of color, moving *nègres libres* from the background to the foreground. The ostensible purpose of the pamphlet was to make a direct claim for political rights in the name of “les nègres libres.” However, the pamphlet also protested the prejudice of *hommes de couleur* and the exclusion of *nègres libres* from the advocacy of the Colons Américains. Invoking notions of purity and bastardy to undermine the claims of free people of color, the pamphlet asserts: “*Le Nègre* comes from pure blood; *le Mulâtre*, to the contrary, comes from mixed blood; it is composed of *Noir* and of *Blanc*, it is a bastard species.”<sup>170</sup> The pamphlet also expressed faith in the colonial deputies to unveil “the ingratitude of the *Gens de couleur* who appear to disdain the authors of their being ....”<sup>171</sup>

While historians have debated whether or not the pamphlet was a forgery drafted by the white colonial deputies, at the very least the advocates for free people of color suggested as much to neutralize the rhetorical effect of a direct appeal in the name of “les nègres libres.” A direct response to the *Réclamations des Nègres libres* titled *Le Généalogiste Américain* compared the origins of the “Creoles blancs” to that of the “Citoyens de couleur,” suggesting that it is impossible to say that those creoles considered “white” do not have some African ancestry dating back to the early colonial period as a way to counter the colonial lobby’s rhetorical focus on origins and phenotype.

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<sup>170</sup> *Réclamations des Nègres libres, Colons Américains* (Paris, 1789), 1.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

Embracing universal egalitarianism, *Le Généalogiste Amériquian* argues that the National Assembly has washed away “the sin of origin” by declaring all men equal.<sup>172</sup>

Another response to the *Réclamation des Nègres libres* explicitly asserted solidarity between *hommes de couleur* and free blacks, maintaining that: “*Les Nègres libres* have sought representation in common, under the title *Colons Amériquains*; nobody could exclude them, they are men, free men, and vexed, this alone is enough ... Thus, since it is proved that in the reclamation of the *Colons Amériquains* all men free and vexed by the *Colons Blancs* are included there; it is useless for the deputies of the *Colons blancs* to unveil the purported ingratitude of the *Colons Amériquains* toward their black fathers.”<sup>173</sup> These responses from free colored advocates attempted to neutralize the pamphlet issued in the name of “les nègres libres” as a ploy on the part of the white colonial deputies to undermine the commitment of the free colored lobby to egalitarian principles.

In addition to circulating contesting definitions of free people of color, the discursive battles waged in the metropole also helped to define the meaning of the Revolution and how the colonies fit into the French nation. As a direct response to the anonymous *Observations d'un habitant des colonies*, the abbé Cournand wrote a defense of Grégoire's *Memoire en faveur* and of giving political rights to free people of color. While the language used by Cournand is similar to other advocates of political equality for free people of color, his pamphlet is interesting for how it invokes the symbolism of the Revolution in order to argue that racial prejudice no longer has any place in French

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<sup>172</sup> *Le Généalogiste Amériquain, ou la revanche du Panflet, ayant pour titre: Réclamations des Nègres Libres, Colons Amériquains* (n.p., n.d.), 1-2.

<sup>173</sup> *Observations sur un pamphlet ayant pour titre: Réclamation des Nègres libres, colons amériquains* (n.p., n.d.), 6.

society. In commenting on the contempt thrown on “la race des noirs” by the anonymous author of *Observations*, Cournand writes, “do not get angry at a quite absurd man for advancing such a paradox in the month of December of the year 1789.”<sup>174</sup> This quote reveals how the issue of equality for free people of color became a sounding board with which the meaning of the Revolution became defined. The debates over race were one of the issues that created sharp contrasts between the two sides, thereby revealing the space between the “Old Regime” mentality and the Revolutionary spirit. It is through debates that invoked the meaning or spirit of the Revolution to support a particular cause that the Declaration of Rights of Man and 1789 were imbued with meaning and significance, becoming turning points against which subsequent decisions were judged.

In 1789, there emerged two competing definitions of free people of color within the metropolitan discursive space. The language employed by advocates for people of color shifted attention away from any possible socio-economic divisions within the group by referring to all free people of color as “citoyens de couleur,” “hommes de couleur,” or “gens de couleur,” thereby silencing the concerns and presence of *nègres libres* in order to avoid any discussion of whether distinctions of phenotype should play a role in citizenship. In contrast, the language circulated by proponents of colonial whites sought to highlight the social divisions within the group to justify their own prejudices, undermine the egalitarian rhetoric of lobbyists for free people of color, and inject racist language into the debate over political rights. They also wanted to show that the majority of free people of color were from a different socio-economic background than the most visible free colored lobbyists in Paris, such as Julien Raimond and Vincent Ogé.

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<sup>174</sup> Abbé Cournand, *Réponse aux observations d'un habitant des colonies...*, 30.



In the same way that debates over race transcended a particular group's interests and took the form of a referendum on the general principles of the Revolution, the colonial question became one that helped define the nation and the imperial structure France would take. Driven by the desire of French colonists to assume greater autonomy, the debate over how the colonies would fit into the constitutional structure became about the general principles underlying the nation. In December 1789, debate began about the formation of a specially designated Colonial Committee to address all proposed laws related to the colonies. The role of the proposed Colonial Committee was to debate any potential legislation impacting the colonies before passing it on to the National Assembly to be voted on by all the deputies. The rationale behind instituting the Colonial Committee was that it would create laws better suited for colonial society than would emerge from open debate in the Assembly.

While French colonists generally sought as much autonomy as possible, the planter lobby actually favored the formation of a Colonial Committee.<sup>175</sup> In a speech delivered December 1, 1789, Saint-Méry asserted that the contentious debates over slavery, the slave trade, and the political rights of free people of color had raised “reasonable doubts” about the right of the National Assembly to pass laws regarding the colonies. In his view, the differences between metropolitan and colonial society required that issues relating to the colonies be vetted outside the politically charged atmosphere of the National Assembly. The ultimate fear of the colonists was that the Assembly would make a move to abolish slavery in similar fashion to the dramatic session of August 4 that

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<sup>175</sup> Carolyn Fick, “The French Revolution in Saint-Domingue: A Triumph or a Failure?” in *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean*, David Barry Gaspar and David Geggus, eds. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 57.

resulted in the Declaration of Rights of Man and the end of aristocratic privilege. For colonial interests, a Colonial Committee stacked with deputies from the colonies and the metropolitan port cities offered a bulwark against any radical change emanating from the National Assembly that could potentially endanger slavery or the slave trade.

The polemics published in favor of Colonial Committee raised a more general constitutional issue as well about the relationship between France and its colonies. Should laws passed in the metropole apply to the colonies? Should the colonies be able to make their own laws to govern internal affairs as they see fit? The logic of the Revolution was based in fundamental universal principles, so any argument that those principles only applied to France and not the colonies in many ways undermined the entire foundation of the Revolution. In elaborating on his “reasonable doubts” about the ability of the National Assembly to pass good laws for the colonies, Saint-Méry maintained that “the principle of these doubts is the shocking differences that nature has put between the physical environment of different parts of the globe, and the dissimilarity between the climate and industry of the colonies and those of France.”<sup>176</sup> In Saint-Méry’s view colonial society was the natural outgrowth of the environment there, and as a result, laws that may be well suited for French society were not necessarily good for the colonial world.

This argument was echoed by a deputy from the maritime city Nantes, Mosneron de l’Aunay, in a speech delivered February 26, 1790 in which he argued that the Declaration of Rights should not be applied to the colonies:

This declaration, Messieurs, is a luminous beacon that enlightens all the decisions

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<sup>176</sup> Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Opinion de M. Moreau de Saint-Méry, Député de la Martinique, sur la Motion de M. de Curt, Député de la Guadeloupe, pour l’établissement d’un Comité chargé particulièrement de l’examen de tous les objets Coloniaux* (Paris: De l’Imprimerie Nationale, 1789), 3.

of the National Assembly that concern France; but I have the courage to say to you that it is a pitfall placed in all of our external and maritime relations. It is necessary that we circumvent this danger against which our ships and public fortune will crash.<sup>177</sup>

Clearly, this author is concerned with the impact that the abolition of slavery and the slave trade would have on the commerce on which maritime cities such as Nantes depended, so naturally his position opposes the promulgation of any laws in the colonies that could disrupt the lucrative colonial commerce. However, the arguments by Saint-Méry and de l'Aunay share the conviction that the laws of France should not be applied universally and the specific conditions of the local environment should be taken into consideration.

The idea of the Declaration of Rights of Man being executed to its full extent in the colonies is certainly one that scared the deputies from Saint-Domingue as well. In their correspondence with their constituents in Cap Francais, the deputies revealed their reactions to the rapid and sweeping changes being wrought by the National Assembly. On January 11, 1790, the same day that the Amis des Noirs delivered an anti-slavery speech to the National Assembly, the Saint-Domingue deputies wrote to their constituents about the threat that the language of rights and equality posed to a society founded on slavery and racial prejudice. The deputies advised their constituents that “it became a type of terror when we saw the Declaration of the Rights of Man pose, as the base of the constitution, absolute equality... and the liberty of all individuals.”<sup>178</sup> Given their obsession with any potential threats to slavery or white supremacy in the colonies, the

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<sup>177</sup> *Discours sur les colonies et la traite des noirs, prononcé le 23 février 1790, par M. Mosneron de l'Aunay, député du commerce de Nantes près l'Assemblée Nationale, à la Société des Amis de la Constitution* (Paris, 1790), 12-13.

<sup>178</sup> *Correspondance secrète des députés de Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1791), 30.

specter of the language of rights loomed large in the mind of the colonial deputies. Their primary concern following the formation of the Colonial Committee was to ensure that the committee was sympathetic to their concerns and that above all the colonies remained spared from the French constitution.

As a result, the colonial deputies lobbied the Colonial Committee heavily, writing memoirs in order to head off the National Assembly from taking the colonial question into its own hands. One of the deputies' main goals was to prevent the National Assembly from recognizing the political rights of free people of color. In their correspondence with their constituents, the deputies indicate that "the pretention of the *mulâtres* is still undecided [by the National Assembly], and we are uniting all our efforts in order to make them fall."<sup>179</sup> Their plan to prevent the free people of color from gaining recognition from the National Assembly included lobbying the Colonial Committee and essentially arguing that the rights of free people of color were already recognized in Saint-Domingue. In a memoir presented to the Colonial Committee, the Saint-Domingue deputies wrote that "*les noirs libres et les gens de couleur citoyens actifs* have already been admitted to the assemblies that have named deputies to the Provincial Assembly of the North."<sup>180</sup> In fact, though, no free people of color, even those meeting the requirements of active citizenship, had been admitted to the provincial elections or been allowed to name deputies, and as news arrived from Saint-Domingue about the conflicts over the formation of Provincial Assemblies there, the colonial question was put before the National Assembly.

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, 48.

On March 2, 1790, after hearing several reports sent to the Naval Ministry by the royal administrators stationed in Saint-Domingue, the National Assembly voted to send the questions about the legislative powers of colonial assemblies and the electoral procedures to be used in colonial elections to its Colonial Committee for deliberation. On March 8, 1790, the chairman of the Colonial Committee, Antoine Barnave, delivered his report to the assembly. Barnave's proposal reveals the heavy influence that the colonial lobby had on the committee. At almost every turn, he embraced the colonial deputies' framing of the situation in the colonies. Barnave asserted that France's greatest priority was maintaining its commercial ties with its colonies, and he blamed the recent troubles in Saint-Domingue on "the oppression of an arbitrary ministerial regime," echoing the historic accusation of "ministerial despotism" so often invoked by French colonists.<sup>181</sup> The report delivered by Barnave also insisted that the "insurrections" by white colonists against the royal administration were not directed "against the nation, nor against the king, but against despotism." Finally, Barnave's report embraced the constitutional principle advanced by Moreau de Saint-Méry by noting that "the climate, the soil, productions, customs, etc. necessitate a difference" between the governments of France and the colonies.<sup>182</sup> Thus, the Colonial Committee's proposal essentially placated the desires of the colonial deputies by granting the colonies internal legislative autonomy

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<sup>181</sup> Gabriel Debien, *Les colons des Saint-Domingue et la révolution: Essai sur le Club Massiac (Août 1789-Août 1792)* (Librairie Armand Colin, 1953), 45-47, discusses the discontent of white colonists with the administration of the colonies and desire for more autonomy over internal affairs leading up to the French Revolution. See chapter 4 of Garrigus, *Before Haiti* for more on the reform of the French colonial administration after the Seven Years' War to address the growing divide between "imperial loyalty and colonial self-interest." See Yves Benot, *La révolution française et la fin des colonies* (Paris, 1989), 43-56 for a detailed discussion of how white colonists invoked "ministerial despotism" during the early years of the Revolution.

<sup>182</sup> *Gazette nationale, ou le moniteur universel*, Mardi 9 Mars 1790, no. 69 in *Réimpression de l'Ancien Moniteur depuis la réunion des états-généraux jusqu'au consultat (Mai 1789-Novembre 1799)*, Volume 2 (Paris, 1840), 552-553.

and acknowledging that the principles of the French constitution were not necessarily fit for the colonies. The proposal was well-received in the assembly and was adopted nearly unanimously as the March 8 decree, granting the colonies the right to form colonial assemblies.

The National Assembly met again at the end of March to issue instructions for the execution of the March 8 decree, which primarily meant drafting procedures for the election of colonial assemblies. The drafting of the instructions on electoral procedures produced much more contentious debates in the assembly than had the original decision to allow the formation of colonial assemblies. The question of electoral procedures to be used in the colonies raised the issue of political rights for free people of color. Barnave attempted to finesse the issue with an ambiguously worded article that could be interpreted favorably by either side. Article 4 of the March 28 instructions stated:

Immediately after the proclamation and the posting of the [March 8] decree and the [March 28] instruction in each parish, *tous les personnes* aged 25 years, landowning, or ... living in the parish for two years and paying taxes, will gather to form provincial assemblies.<sup>183</sup>

The reference to “*tous les personnes*” was left intentionally vague, not explicitly including or excluding free people of color. Barnave wanted to be able to assure the advocates of political equality for free people of color that as free men who met the other qualifications they were included as “persons,” while also giving the white colonists the prerogative to exclude them.

The abbé Grégoire was the first to draw attention to the dangerous ambiguity inherent in the wording of article 4. After taking the floor of the assembly, he announced

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<sup>183</sup> *Gazette nationale, ou le moniteur universel*, Lundi 29 Mars 1790, no. 88 in *Réimpression de l'Ancien Moniteur depuis la réunion des états-généraux jusqu'au consultat (Mai 1789-Novembre 1799)*, Volume 2 (Paris, 1840), 726.

that he “feared” that article 4 left “an important object” in doubt, but that “the colonial deputies have announced to me that they do not intend to deprive the *gens de couleur* of eligibility [to vote], and I renounce the floor, on the condition that they renounce the aristocracy of color.”<sup>184</sup> A deputy from Saint-Domingue named Cocherel immediately responded that he had made no such statement to Grégoire and maintained that if deputies from other colonies wanted to give such assurances they could, but they had no right to give them for Saint-Domingue.<sup>185</sup> The exchange between Grégoire and Cocherel foreshadowed the conflict that the ambiguity of article 4 would raise in the colonies. Despite Grégoire’s attempt to gain clarification of the term “tous les personnes” and to have free people of color explicitly recognized, the assembly adopted the March 28 instructions without amending article 4.

With the March 8 decree and March 28 instructions, the National Assembly essentially washed its hands of the issue that advocates of free people of color had been pressing since 1789. This decision had an impact on the language of race as well because it forced promoters of racial equality to pull back on their rhetoric. During the month previous to the March 8 decree, the Amis des Noirs published an address to the National Assembly on the abolition of the slave trade. In this speech, the Amis continued to attack racial prejudice, declaring “that all men are born free and equal in rights. Oh why then, are there only irons and gallows for *les Noirs*, when happiness shines only for the whites?”<sup>186</sup> While the Amis des Noirs continued to lobby public opinion after the March

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<sup>184</sup> *Gazette nationale, ou le moniteur universel*, Mardi 30 Mars 1790, no. 89 in *Réimpression de l’Ancien Moniteur depuis la réunion des états-généraux jusqu’au consultat (Mai 1789-Novembre 1799)*, Volume 2 (Paris, 1840), 732.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, 733.

<sup>186</sup> *Adresse à l’Assemblée Nationale, pour l’abolition de la Traite des Noirs. Par la Société des Amis des Noirs de Paris. Février 1790* (Paris, Imprimerie de Portier de Lille, 1790), 19.

8 decree, a clause of the decree made it treason to try to incite a slave uprising in the colony, and it was aimed at the groups and individuals in the metropole who were writing against slavery. The polemics published by the Amis after the March 8 decree continued to invoke sympathy for blacks; however, they backed off of any direct attacks on slavery and instead began to defend the motives and intentions of the society. A pamphlet from April 1790 noted that since 1789 the Amis have “defended the cause of these unfortunates who resemble us by the same needs, the same miseries, the same faculties, and who, perpetually victim of our false calculations, without representatives, because no one supposes of them neither intelligence nor will, could only have for defenders disinterested, courageous men free from all types of prejudice.”<sup>187</sup> While the language of race in the above quote is significant for arguing that people of African descent have the same faculties as whites, the primary goal of the statement was to position the Amis des Noirs favorably. Thus, the language of race stagnated after the March 8 decree as both the status of slaves and the rights of free people of color were taken out of the hands of the National Assembly and handed over to the colonies themselves. Metropolitan discourse lost much of its polemical edge when influencing public opinion became less of an imperative, as legally the colonies assumed responsibility over issues related to the status of persons.

While the March 8 decree had an immediate impact on the metropolitan discursive space, the news of the law did not arrive in the Caribbean until late May 1790 due to the delay of roughly two months in crossing the Atlantic by ship. The National Assembly’s decision to allow the colonies to form their own representative assemblies

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<sup>187</sup> *Seconde adresse à l’Assemblée Nationale, par la Société des Amis des Noirs, établie à Paris (9 avril 1790)*, (Paris, Imprimerie du Patriote Francois, 1790), 4.



with full control over the internal affairs of government, including the “status of persons,” was greeted warmly by the white planters. The March 8 decree assured whites the ability to exclude free people of color from colonial elections and dominate the proceedings of government. In Saint-Domingue, the three provincial assemblies wasted no time in organizing elections for a general Colonial Assembly to be seated in Saint-Marc, a city centrally located between Port-au-Prince, the historic administrative capital, and Cap Francais, the vibrant economic capital of the colony. Elections for representatives to the Colonial Assembly were held without a single vote cast by a person of color.<sup>188</sup>

Once established in Saint-Marc, the Colonial Assembly acted aggressively to enact measures aimed at making the colony more autonomous. The assembly dominated by white planters and merchants secured their trade interests by nullifying the French *exclusif*, which stipulated that French colonies may only trade with French merchants. The *exclusif* was a mercantile strategy designed to keep colonial goods and wealth within the French trading network; however, colonial planters and merchants saw the *exclusif* as an example of “ministerial despotism.” They desired more control over the trade of their goods and wanted to open colonial ports to traders from all nations in order to drive up the price of their produce. In addition to opening Saint-Domingue’s ports, the Colonial Assembly at Saint-Marc expressly denied the sovereignty of the National Assembly over the Colonial Assembly, and it asserted that the only power above its own was the king himself. In conjunction with its autonomist principles, the Colonial Assembly also promulgated a constitution that established Saint-Domingue as an autonomous entity in

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<sup>188</sup> Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 79.

partnership with France rather than as a dominion of France. Overall, in an effort to counter the “ministerial despotism” so long rallied against by white planters and merchants in Saint-Domingue, the Colonial Assembly essentially declared de facto independence from France.<sup>189</sup>

The only check on the power of the Colonial Assembly within the administrative structure of the colony was the colonial governor as the representative of the king. While the March 8 decree had authorized the colonists to form representative assemblies to handle local and internal affairs, the assertive maneuvers of the assembly at Saint-Marc were clearly out of line with the provisions of the National Assembly’s directive. In response to its secessionist measures, Governor Peinier sent troops to march on Saint-Marc and forcefully disband the assembly. Although outraged and reluctant to concede to the “despotism” of the royal administration, the deputies ultimately dispersed, and 85 of them sailed to France in order to justify their actions before the National Assembly and to denounce the tyranny of the royal administration headed by Governor Peinier.<sup>190</sup>

Named for the ship upon which they sailed to France, the “Léopardins” arrived in Paris in September 1790. The Léopardin deputies faced heavy criticism for the separatist constitution they had passed for Saint-Domingue on May 28, 1790.<sup>191</sup> The debate stirred by the arrival of the Léopardins and their public opinion campaign to justify their actions re-opened the free people of color issue that had, since the March 8 decree, shifted to the colonial sphere as the National Assembly had washed its hands of the issue leaving the status of persons up to the Colonial Assembly. The fact that the radical measures under

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<sup>189</sup> Yves Benot, *La révolution française et la fin des colonies*, 53-54; Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint-Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 81-82.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

fire had been taken by an all-white assembly elected without any votes from free people of color raised the question of whether or not representation for free coloreds would perhaps temper the radicalism of the colonial government. On one hand, there was the argument that if the National Assembly granted political equality to free people of color they would remain loyal to the institution securing their equality. On the other hand, there was the notion that any steps in that direction would further alienate the white population already inclined toward separating from France. Regardless, since the “status of persons” had been left up to a now defunct Colonial Assembly, the issue again fell back on the National Assembly.

In the session of October 12, 1790, Barnave addressed the assembly in the name of the Colonial Committee to outline events in Saint-Domingue since the passage of the March 8 decree and to answer to the criticism levied against the Léopardin deputies. Barnave’s position essentially attempted to reverse the excesses of the Saint-Domingue assembly without alienating the white colonists by undermining their control over internal affairs. Passed as the October 12 decree, Barnave’s proposal declared that the Saint-Domingue Colonial Assembly had violated constitutional principles and formally ordered its dissolution, nullifying all of its decrees as well. However, it also called for the continued execution of the March 8 and 28 decrees with the election of a new assembly, and most importantly to the colonists, it included a promise on the part of the National Assembly to not initiate any “law on the status of persons” unless expressly requested by the colonial assemblies. Grégoire attempted to speak in response to

Barnave's proposal but was shouted down, and the proposed decree passed "by a great majority."<sup>192</sup> The October 12 decree again left the rights of free people of color in limbo.

Although shouted down in the assembly, in his *Lettre aux Philantropes*, the abbé Grégoire offered a scathing rebuke of the October 12 decree, which he asserted marks "an era forever mournful in the annals of history."<sup>193</sup> Grégoire's primary frustration with the law was the National Assembly's insistence on letting the colonists themselves hold the fate of the "status of persons" within the colony. Grégoire sarcastically remarked:

You have decided (something unheard of in all nations!) that there will not be any change in the status of persons in our islands unless it is demanded by the colonists; this is to say that you will only extirpate the abuse on the wish of those who live by it, who solicit its prolongation! This is to say that the eternal rights of man are subordinate to pride and to avarice! This is to say that [free people of color] are the playthings of oppression, until it pleases their despots to alleviate their plight!<sup>194</sup>

Grégoire supported his outcry against the National Assembly's refusal to take any action to protect the political rights of free people of color with a four-part argument to demonstrate that the October 12 decree failed to uphold the promises and principles of the National Assembly and that it lacked justice and "humanity."<sup>195</sup> Grégoire also made the argument that the October 12 decree was not practical politically because the National Assembly's indecisiveness only created disorder and conflict between whites and people of color, which upset the stability of the slave society.

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<sup>192</sup> *Gazette nationale, ou le moniteur universel*, Mardi 12 Oct 1790, no. 285 in *Réimpression de l'Ancien Moniteur depuis la réunion des états-généraux jusqu'au consultat (Mai 1789-Novembre 1799)*, Volume 6 (Paris, 1847), 107.

<sup>193</sup> Abbé Grégoire, *Lettre aux Philantropes, sur les malheurs, les droits et les réclamations des Gens de couleur de Saint-Domingue, et des autres îles françoise de l'Amérique* (Paris, 1790), 1.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid*, 1-2.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid*, 2-3.

With regard to the language of race, Grégoire's *Lettre aux philanthropes* is similar to his *Mémoire en faveur* and the rhetoric of other advocates for people of color. The language used by Grégoire tended to lump all free people of color into the same socio-economic category, and it also overshadowed the interests and presence of a substantial free black constituency by consistently using the term "sang-mêlés" or "mulâtres" to refer to the entire population. In his characterization of the free colored population, Grégoire repeats many of the assertions from his original polemic in favor of free people of color and that were first circulated by Julien Raimond. Grégoire notes that the population of free colored individuals in the French Caribbean is roughly 40,000, and he asserts that "*les sang-mêlés* possess a third of landed property."<sup>196</sup> Grégoire positions free people of color as an important economic force as property owners to strengthen their argument for political rights given contemporary ideas behind active citizenship for those with a stake in government and society.

It was important for Grégoire and other advocates for free people of color to position them as property owners in order to bolster their claim to political rights and highlight the injustice of denying them any real stake in the political process. The injustice of denying political rights to free colored property owners arose many times during debates in the Committee of Verification about the legitimacy of the white colonial deputies, and with the formation of the Colonial Committee, the colonial deputies successfully lobbied to have the issue left in the hands of the colonies, in part, by arguing that the interests of free colored property owners were already represented in the provincial assemblies. Grégoire undermined that argument by citing the instructions for

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid, 3.

the election of the Colonial Assembly, where it was ordered that “as it has *always been practiced* [italics by Grégoire], *les mulâtres, nègres*, and other *gens de couleur libres*, will not be admitted to vote in the provincial assemblies, etc.”

In addition to language that framed all free people of color as property-owning “sang-mêlés,” Grégoire’s *Lettre aux philanthropes* also sustained another trope of metropolitan racist language with regard to the free colored population, which was to distance individuals of the group and the group’s interests from any association with slavery. At one point, Grégoire reiterates that “*les sang-mêlés* are free; they are not still slaves ....”<sup>197</sup> He elaborated the point, explaining “I insist on the word *libres*, applied to the *gens de couleur*,” because those opposed to equality for free people of color try to confuse the issues of political equality and abolition by “crying that someone wants to kill all the whites, in freeing the *Nègres*, ..., whose cause has nothing in common with that of the *mulâtres*.”<sup>198</sup> The insistence on using the correct term to differentiate one group from another underlines the importance of language when discussing socially constructed categories and the different civil statuses that emerge from them.

Meanwhile, in October 1790 Vincent Ogé, who had grown frustrated with lobbying the National Assembly, arrived in Saint-Domingue and assembled a rebellion of free men of color to secure their political rights. Historian John Garrigus has recently clarified some previously misunderstood aspects of the Ogé rebellion. He argues that the Ogé rebellion was a political rather than military movement, and that Ogé himself adopted military regalia and titles in order to bring a brand of citizenship and civic virtue

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid, 3.

surrounding the citizen-soldier that was embodied by the Parisian National Guard to Saint-Domingue.<sup>199</sup> This revolutionary notion of citizenship formed in 1789 seemed to reinforce the claims of free men of color since they carried the heaviest burden of militia service in the colony. Ogé's movement was short-lived, though, and upon his capture, Ogé was brought to Cap-Français to be interrogated so that authorities could assess the extent of the "conspiracy."

The transcript of Ogé's interrogation reveals the colonial obsession with skin color. In addition to asking his name, the interrogator started by asking Ogé to identify his racial classification. Ogé responded that he was a "*quarteron* free from birth." Additionally, the interrogators found it necessary to ask Ogé about the racial identity of his parents. Ogé was asked to state the name and "color" of his father and mother. Ogé stated that his father was "Jacques Ogé and that he was *Blanc*." His mother was Angilique Osse and she "is a *mulâtresse* and legitimate daughter of a *Blanc* named Joseph Osse and a *nègresse* whose name he did not recollect."<sup>200</sup> In addition to revealing a general colonial obsession with a rigid racial classification system, Ogé's interrogation points to social divisions between *hommes de couleur* and *nègres libres*. In assessing whether *nègres libres* were involved in the Ogé rebellion, the interrogator asked Ogé if he had received any free blacks into his movement. Ogé answered that "he had never fondly received any *nègre libre* [into his movement] and even that he scarcely knew any."<sup>201</sup> Similar to the free people of color's political movement in France that tended to

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<sup>199</sup> John D. Garrigus, "'Thy coming fame, Ogé! Is sure'" in *Assumed Identities: The Meanings of Race in the Atlantic World*. John D. Garrigus and Christopher Morris, eds. (University of Texas at Arlington Press, 2010), 25-26, 38.

<sup>200</sup> AN DXXXV 58, dossier 574. I would like to thank Professor John Garrigus for sharing his transcription of Ogé's testimony.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

advocate for *hommes de couleur* and silence the concerns of *nègres libres*, Ogé's movement in the colony also was primarily concerned with gaining rights for *hommes de couleur*. Although Ogé maintained throughout his interrogation that his movement was purely political and not military in nature, he was ultimately tortured and broken on the wheel in public, with his head being severed and displayed on a pike in Cap Français.<sup>202</sup>

In January 1791, a few weeks after news of Ogé's rebellion had arrived in France, Raimond published his *Observations sur l'origine du préjugé*. Raimond's *Observations* were written in response to a proposal by the Colonial Committee to grant active citizenship to a segment of the free people of color population based on their phenotype.<sup>203</sup> A preface to the *Observations* by Brissot alluded to this proposal that never got off the ground and criticized the "disastrous consequences of this barbaric idea."<sup>204</sup> Brissot and Raimond both opposed granting political rights to free people of color based on phenotype, arguing that "it is the most effective means of arming brothers against brothers, children against their fathers."<sup>205</sup> In addition to making a pragmatic argument against the ill effects of the proposed measure, Brissot pointed out that distinctions based on phenotype went against the principles of the Revolution: "The National Assembly must be just toward ALL [caps in original], or it violates its principles and overturns the constitution." Sidestepping the injustice toward slaves, Brissot argued that "free men must ALL be on the same level, or it will kindle an eternal war in the

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<sup>202</sup> Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 83; Jeremy Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 72.

<sup>203</sup> Florence Gauthier, *L'aristocratie de l'épiderme*, 231.

<sup>204</sup> Jacques Pierre Brissot, Preface of *Observations sur l'origine du préjugé* (Paris, 1791), vii.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*



islands.”<sup>206</sup> Raimond continued the argument introduced by Brissot in his preface and commented also on the origins of free people of color and the prejudice against them.

The first part of Raimond’s pamphlet focused on defining who free people of color were for his metropolitan audience. Raimond framed the situation in fairly simple terms that would make the free colored population unquestionably sympathetic group. According to Raimond, “the white planters, who are the aristocrats, the nobles of the colonies, want to take away [the rights of citizenship] priceless to the *mulâtres libres*, whom they detest and want to debase.”<sup>207</sup> Raimond asserted that whites had tried to confuse the National Assembly by “conflating the cause of the *gens de couleur* with that of the slaves ...”<sup>208</sup> Raimond sought to distinguish the cause of free people of color from that of the slaves. Asserting that many members of the Assembly lacked a clear idea of who free people of color are, Raimond expressed his desire to “enlighten them” on certain aspects of the group. Raimond began by defining the terms “mulâtre” and “gens de couleur” often used in debates on the issue. He defined “mulâtre” as “the product of a white male and a black female,” and he defined “gens de couleur, or sang-mêlés” as “the product of *mulâtres* between themselves or of *mulâtres* with whites, and their various offspring.”<sup>209</sup>

In order to counter the discourse advanced by the colonial lobby that free people of color owed something to whites, Raimond provided a history of free people of color that legitimized their origins. He asserted that due to a lack of white women, “the first whites” of Saint-Domingue would live with “femmes africaines” in “a state of

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Julien Raimond, *Observations sur l’origine du préjugé* (Paris, 1791), 1.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid, 1-2.

marriage.”<sup>210</sup> After having children, white men would pass inheritance to their children of color as they would any other legitimate child. Raimond concluded that “the biggest part of the class of *gens de couleur* is born free, with free parents legitimately married, and those who are illegitimate are born with free mothers.”<sup>211</sup> Moreover, he asserted that “on the whole of this class, there are not more than 200 who had truly been slaves and freed.”<sup>212</sup> Raimond rejects the label of “affranchis” as applied to free people of color by colonial lobbyists. Commentators such as Moreau de Saint-Méry used the term “affranchis” to refer to free people of color as a whole in order to represent them as a group that owed obedience and loyalty to whites in return for the gift of manumission. “Affranchis” became a loaded term in these debates because it invoked an emotional debt on the part of free people of color. Raimond explicitly rejected the discourse promoted by white colonists, redefining the group in public discourse.

As Jeremy Popkin has observed, Raimond was one of the earliest critics to suggest that color prejudice was an arbitrary social construction.<sup>213</sup> Raimond attributed a fairly recent origin to prejudice against free people of color, suggesting that it “does not date from more than thirty years.”<sup>214</sup> Raimond attributed the origins of prejudice to the social jealousy of white women. Raimond asserted that during the first half of the eighteenth century more European men and women came to Saint-Domingue looking to make a fortune. However, the Frenchmen who immigrated preferred to marry women of color to gain access to land and slaves. The jealousies among “femmes blanches” of the

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Jeremy Popkin, “Colonial Enlightenment and the French Revolution: Julien Raimond and Milscent Créole,” paper presented at June 2015 colloquium at Halle.

<sup>214</sup> Raimond, *Observations*, 13-14.

favoritism showed to women of color turned to hatred. Raimond argued that white men also became jealous of the French educations acquired by some free men of color, which led to segregationist laws beginning in 1763.<sup>215</sup>

Raimond identified color prejudice as a hindrance to the prosperity of Saint-Domingue. The young free people of color who had acquired educations in France returned to the colony to find laws that “smothered all the talents and industry of this class.”<sup>216</sup> Raimond’s main argument against color prejudice was that the colony was being deprived of the productivity of an important segment of the population by laws that prohibited free people of color from freely exercising their talents and virtues.

Raimond’s view on the disadvantages of color prejudice helps reconcile his support of slavery as well as the civil and political equality of free people of color. Raimond had a pragmatic or utilitarian perspective rather than a universal natural right perspective. Ending slavery would ruin the prosperity of the plantation economy and, thus, damage the vitality of colonial society. Conversely, in Raimond’s view, abolishing color prejudice would allow a significant segment of the free population to pursue greater economic and social opportunities, enhancing the health of colonial society.

Raimond saw little difficulty in abolishing color prejudice because of its relatively recent origin and arbitrary nature. He realized, however, that it was necessary to combat the “false terror” spread by the “colons blancs” on “the effects of the abolitions of prejudice.”<sup>217</sup> Given the nature of revolutionary political culture and its emphasis on rational debate, this accusation would seem especially damning because it charges white

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid, 5-10.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid, 14.

colonists and their spokesmen with trying to inflame passions in order to protect an unjust privilege. In Raimond's view, rather than having negative consequences, abolishing color prejudice would destroy the internal divisions among the free population, helping to stabilize colonial society and protect slavery. He proposed that the Constituent Assembly declare that "all *sang-mêlés libres* of the colonies have the right of being active citizens ...." This measure would encourage whites to marry "filles de couleur" and "in twenty years ... prejudice would be effaced" because "marriages between pure whites would quickly be few in number, and the old pretensions that they could conserve, would be annihilated by the general interest of the majority, which would tend to destroy them."<sup>218</sup> Raimond's vision for eliminating color prejudice illuminates several important points. Firstly, his focus on making all "sang-mêlés" active citizens indicates a blind spot to the concerns of *nègres libres*, which would ultimately be reflected in the May 15 law as well. Secondly, Ramond's prediction that whites and "sang-mêlés" would merge together through intermarriage shows that, in his mind, he wanted whites and free people of color to form a unitary master class over the slaves rather than for free people of color to displace whites as the dominant social group in a divided master class.<sup>219</sup>

Ogé's revolt and subsequent brutal execution would prove to be a major turning point in the lobbying campaign of free people of color in Paris. News of the revolt

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid, 21-22.

<sup>219</sup> Florence Gauthier has argued that Raimond embraced universal egalitarianism and sought to eliminate all privileges based on phenotype, in Florence Gauthier, *L'aristocratie de l'épiderme*, 236-37. In my view, Raimond's egalitarianism was conservative in nature since ultimately he wanted to see free people of color and whites unite as a privileged class dominant over the slaves. My interpretation of Raimond's views falls more in line with Yvan Debbasch's reading of a "sub-racism" in his ideas that continued to see racial distinctions among free people of color in *Couleur et liberté*, 151-154. Robert Forster's analysis of Raimond's writings also detects a sub-racism or at least a sensitivity to racial distinctions in "Who is a citizen? The Boundaries of 'La Patrie': The French Revolution and the People of Color, 1789-91" *French Politics and Society* Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer 1989), 57.

offered supporters of political rights for free men of color evidence of the disorder caused by the ambiguity of the National Assembly's March 28 instructions on colonial voting procedures calling for "all persons" to vote in elections, and the brutal execution of Ogé at the hands of the whites seemed to turn public opinion in favor of free men of color. During the May 1791 debates over the Colonial Committee's proposal to allow a congress of white colonists to decide the issue of political rights for free people of color, Grégoire criticized the negative effect of the March 8 decree and positioned Ogé as a martyr to his love of liberty. He argued that disorder arose from the law "because you wanted to humor all parties. You said to the *mulâtres*: You are included under the denomination of *toutes personnes*. You said to the *blancs*: The assembly did not include *les gens de couleur* ... What was the result of this double step? Nothing other than the fighting and resentment of the two parties."<sup>220</sup> Grégoire's language reflects a fairly consistent pattern among advocates for free colored political rights after Raimond joined the *Colons Américains* of framing their cause as one primarily about people of shared European and African ancestry by not specifically drawing attention to *nègres libres*.<sup>221</sup>

Grégoire proposed that the motion of the Colonial Committee be rejected and that the National Assembly declare that "the *gens de couleur* enjoy the rights of active citizens, like other Frenchmen."<sup>222</sup> The assembly then engaged in several days of prolonged and often heated debate from May 11-15 over whether to grant the rights of citizenship to free people of color or to leave the initiative on the issue in the hands of the

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<sup>220</sup> *Gazette nationale ou Le moniteur universel*, Jeudi 12 Mai 1791, no. 132 in *Réimpression de l'Ancien Moniteur depuis la réunion des états-généraux jusqu'au consultat (Mai 1789-Novembre 1799)*, Volume 8 (Paris, 1847), 366-367.

<sup>221</sup> David Geggus, "Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession during the Constituent Assembly," 1297-98

<sup>222</sup> *Gazette nationale ou Le moniteur universel*, Jeudi 12 Mai 1791, no. 132, 367.

colonies. Lobbyists from both sides of the issues maneuvered to have their voices heard. Following Grégoire's address to the assembly, the president presiding over the proceedings announced that he had received two addresses, "one from the commissioners of the *citoyens de couleur*" and the other from the representatives of maritime commercial interests. As one would expect, the address from the *citoyens de couleur* asked "that the Assembly declare that they were included in the class of active citizens," while the representatives of French commercial interests requested that the Assembly adopt the proposal of the colonial committee as a "rigorous and indispensable outcome of the preamble of the October 12 decree."<sup>223</sup>

The deputies who spoke during the debates approached the problem from several different perspectives, framing it as either a constitutional issue or a question of justice and natural rights. The deputy Clermont-Tonnerre supported the proposal of the Colonial Committee with an argument grounded in Enlightenment social contract theory. He argued that "le pacte social" emerged out of the common interests of those who entered, so it could not be changed at the expense of one of the parties. Therefore, in Clermont-Tonnerre's view, any attempt by the National Assembly to take the initiative away from the colonies on the issue of free people of color would "exercise the despotism of the metropole over the colonies ...."<sup>224</sup> Additionally, the deputy Malouet repeated the argument advanced by the colonial lobby since 1789 that colonial society could not "reconcile itself with the principles of the Declaration of Rights ... [because] ... the population of the colonies is composed of free men and slaves, and the society that you

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

rule is uniquely composed of free men.”<sup>225</sup> Malouet insisted that any change in the status of *gens de couleur* must be initiated by the colonies since only the colonists themselves are informed about “the dangers that menace them.”<sup>226</sup>

The Marquis de Lafayette on the other hand framed the issue as one about natural rights. In referring to free people of color, he asked: “are they also men?” “Me, I think so,” he stated, and then voiced his support for a motion that would grant political equality to free people of color. Highlighting the heated and contentious nature of the debates, though, a deputy responded to Lafayette’s invocation of the universal rights of man by suggesting that Lafayette was a hypocrite who “had sold *nègres* who without a doubt he regarded as men.”<sup>227</sup> Lafayette, author of an early draft of the *Declaration of Rights*, did indeed own a plantation in Cayenne through his wife’s inheritance, which he sold to avoid the embarrassment of being a slave owner.<sup>228</sup>

An important part of overcoming the argument of the colonial lobby that political equality for free people of color endangered colonial and national prosperity became defining free people of color as a social group that would uphold colonial society. A deputy to the National Assembly and member of the Amis des Noirs named Pétion de Villeneuve gave a long speech that was quoted at length in the *Moniteur Universel*. He positioned free men of color as the backbone of colonial society and the group truly deserving of political rights. “Who are the *homme libres de couleur*?” Pétion asked. “The bulwark of liberty in the colonies,” was his answer. Pétion painted an image of free people of color as virtuous farmers tied to the colony by birth with an interest toward

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<sup>225</sup> *Gazette nationale ou Le moniteur universel*, Vendredi 13 Mai 1791, no. 133, 373.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>228</sup> Harlow G. Unger, *Lafayette* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 215.

seeing their properties flourish for generations, whereas whites merely wanted to make their fortunes then return to France after having “exhausted the land.”<sup>229</sup> In Pétion’s view, extending political rights to free people of color who owned property would not endanger the prosperity of the colony, but rather enhance it, noting that “the more men are free, the better they produce, the more they search for the joys of life.”<sup>230</sup> It is worth noting that Pétion did not extend this line of reasoning to comment directly on slavery in the colonies, though his argument echoes the position of anti-slavery physiocrats who argued that free labor was more productive and efficient than slave labor.<sup>231</sup> Pétion limited himself to proposing that free men of color be included under article 4 of the March 28 decree. Nevertheless, Pétion’s suggestion that free people of color should displace whites in Saint-Domingue rather than be merged with them was bound to embitter the debate.

As an indication of how the terms of the debate came to center on the injustice toward people of mixed African and European descent, a deputy named Lanjuinais invoked the bonds of lineage linking *hommes de couleur* to the French. “Are [the *gens de couleur*] not your brothers, your cousins?” he asked. “And you would not want to let them share your rights because they do not have a complexion as white as yours?”<sup>232</sup> Lanjuinais’ address to the assembly highlights the success of the lobbying campaign by advocates for free people of color in framing the debate in metropolitan public discourse.

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<sup>229</sup> *Gazette nationale ou Le moniteur universel*, Vendredi 13 Mai 1791, no. 133, 374.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> On the anti-slavery opinion of the physiocrats, see: Edward Seeber, *Anti-Slavery Opinion in France during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1971), 98-109, Michele Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire*, 160-70, and Madeleine Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture* (Cornell University Press, 2010), 215-219.

<sup>232</sup> *Gazette nationale ou Le moniteur universel*, Samedi 14 Mai 1791, no. 134, 380.



By focusing on the bonds of kinship between mixed-race *hommes de couleur* and metropolitan Frenchmen, Lanjuinais reflects a rhetorical stance that silenced the injustice toward *nègres libres* and privileged the cause of *hommes de couleur* as one about seeking justice for their fellow Frenchmen, making the exclusion of free people of color seem particularly unjust.

The May debates over whether to grant rights to free people of color reveal an awareness among the deputies of the importance of language as a management device and how defining the social situation a certain way influenced who had access to power. The colonial deputy Moreau de Saint-Méry noted that the difference between active and inactive citizenship was a “purely social convention.” In other words, the difference was created by the National Assembly as a way to define who could participate in the political process. Saint-Méry cited the “Jews of Alsace” as a group in French society that had been excluded from active citizenship for no other reason than because of an artificial distinction made by the Assembly to exclude them. Saint-Méry drew a parallel to colonial society, noting that it was divided into three classes: whites, slaves, and “affranchis.” The class of *affranchis* were the “creation of the colonists,” and, hence, they should have to prerogative to define the group as active or inactive citizens.<sup>233</sup> Free men of color and their advocates in Paris challenged the attempt by commentators such as Moreau de Saint-Méry to lump all free people of color into the category of “affranchis.” They resented the implication that their group was born into slavery, insisting on the fact that the majority of free people of color were born free, and they saw the emotional debt that the term implied free people of color owed to whites as insulting.

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid, 383.

In response to Saint-Méry's speech, a deputy named Regnault brought up the substantial demographic presence of free people of color as a justification for granting them political rights, estimating that there were 29,000 free people of color in the French Caribbean. A deputy shouted out in reply that there were at least 40,000 whites. Roederer, a deputy from Alsace, then criticized any argument founded on racial demographics defined by color by drawing attention to the relative nature of those definitions. He stated quite provocatively that "of the 40,000 whites there are 20,000 who would be *noirs* in France." Without stating it explicitly, Roederer's statement alludes to the inherent malleability of racialist categories and terms as social constructions that have no absolute meaning. Their meaning can change depending on the context, and hence it is foolish to suggest that those terms should serve as the basis for determining an individual's political rights.

Further evidence that the debate over political rights for free people of color centered on mixed-race *hommes de couleur* comes, in this case, from one of the opponents of ending color prejudice in the colonies. The abbé Maury notes that "these *hommes de couleur* are all the descendents of slaves and whites; these *hommes de couleur* owe their liberty to the same white men to which it is proposed that we abruptly assimilate them."<sup>234</sup> Maury argues that it would be "dangerous" to establish political equality between whites and *hommes de couleur* "because most of these *hommes affranchis* still have their brothers, their nephews, their uncles, their fathers maybe, in work gangs populated with slaves."<sup>235</sup> This argument reflects the colonial lobby's

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<sup>234</sup> *Gazette nationale ou Le moniteur universel*, Dimanche 15 Mai 1791, no. 135, 392.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

framing of the situation in the colonies that defined free people of color as being tied through bonds of kinship more to the slave population than the French population of the colony and that tried to cast free people of color as *affranchis*, or individuals born into slavery rather than being born free. Furthermore, it points to a possible explanation of the proposal that would lead to the May 15 law that sought to grant political rights to free men of color who had free parents, which would answer the objection of Maury that it would be dangerous to grant political power to individuals who still had relatives in slavery. Above all Maury feared that granting political rights to *hommes de couleur* would make them “the masters of the colony.” His speech apparently resonated with the Assembly, as the *Moniteur Universel* notes that it received “many rounds of applause in all parts of the room” and that the Assembly even decided “nearly unanimously” to print the speech.

Later in the session of May 14, following the speech by Maury, the Assembly moved to decide whether to give priority to the proposal of the Colonial Committee or to the proposal made earlier by Barère to grant political rights to free people of color. At that point in time, Roederer proposed a decree that would read: “The *hommes de couleur*, born to free parents, and meeting the necessary conditions for obtaining the quality of active citizen, will enjoy all the rights attached to that quality.”<sup>236</sup> For the time being, however, priority was given to the proposal of the Colonial Committee instead. During the course of that discussion, a heated debate opened up over Moreau de Saint-Méry’s proposed amendment to prohibit the National Assembly from ever passing a law on the status of “esclaves.” Robespierre then took the floor, dramatically proclaiming “perish

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid, 395.

the colonies” rather than the principles of the National Assembly. In response to the firestorm created, Saint-Méry withdrew his proposed amendment, but the Assembly remained divided over whether to move to a vote or to reopen discussion.<sup>237</sup>

After deciding to postpone the matter to the following day, one of the secretaries received a letter from Julien Raimond asking to address the Assembly. The colonial lobby and its supporters vehemently protested allowing Raimond to speak. The debate generated on this issue became a symbolically charged referendum on the justice of the National Assembly. Pétion demanded that “les citoyens de couleur” be heard, while the colonial deputies protested that “the letter that has been read was not written in the name of the *gens de couleur* of the colonies, but in the name of some individuals inspired by a certain Society [a reference to the Amis des Noirs].”<sup>238</sup> The argument of the deputy Regnault seems to have swayed the assembly in favor of hearing from Raimond. He argued that justice required that the free people of color be allowed to speak since they did not have any representatives in the National Assembly and were not involved in colonial elections. “Whether you rule in their favor or not,” Regnault stated, “at least they would have the consolation of having been heard.”<sup>239</sup>

The *Moniteur Universel* reported that “after many tumultuous moments, three *citoyens de couleur* were introduced at the bar,” and Raimond addressed the assembly. Raimond’s invitation to speak marked the first time that a person of color was allowed to address the assembly directly, as previously free people of color were forced to petition the assembly in writing or through an intermediary. Raimond focused on two main lines

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid, 395-396; *Gazette nationale ou Le moniteur universel*, Lundi 16 Mai 1791, no. 136, 397-398.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid, 398.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid, 399.

of reasoning to justify granting political rights to free people of color. He began by countering the attempt by pro-colonial lobbyists to underestimate the population and share of property of free people of color as a way to justify the dominance of whites in political affairs. He noted that “people have said to you at the gallery that there is not more than 6,000 *gens de couleur* in the colonies, [but] their number, in Saint-Domingue alone, rises to 27-or-28,000.”<sup>240</sup> Raimond pointed out further that “people have tried to make you believe that the *citoyens de couleur* do not possess anything,” but he maintained that free people of color possessed a third of the plantations in the colony and a quarter of the colony’s slaves.<sup>241</sup> The goal of Raimond’s rhetoric was to highlight the injustice of denying such a substantial and wealthy part of the population political rights.

Raimond’s second line of reasoning related to the role of free men of color in maintaining the internal and external security of the colony through service in the *marechausse*, which was responsible for capturing escaped slaves, and the colonial militia. Far from a group that would potentially be subversive of colonial slavery, Raimond asserted that “it is the *hommes de couleur* who guarantee the colonies against the rebellion of the slaves.”<sup>242</sup> Colonial whites had consistently argued to the National Assembly that any ruling in favor of free people of color would threaten the foundations of the entire slavery system, so demonstrating that free people of color were actually the social group most involved in upholding slavery and maintaining slave discipline was critical to overcoming the reluctance of the assembly to grant them political rights. Now that the assembly was correctly informed of the utility of the *hommes de couleur*,

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

Raimond was sure that it would see that there “was no danger in according them the rights that they demand.”<sup>243</sup>

Raimond even maintained that the “wish of the largest share of *colons*” was to grant rights to free people of color and only the “*petits blancs*” agitated vehemently against it. “Our greatest enemies are therefore the *petits blancs*,” Raimond observed, “... those that are called the *petits blancs* are infinitely more harmful to the colony than all other kinds of men.”<sup>244</sup> He held the *petits blancs* responsible for the most insulting acts of prejudice against *hommes de couleur*, and he accused them of starting a rumor that free people of color wanted to instigate a slave revolt, which Raimond dismissed as preposterous, saying that free people of color were property owners with a financial stake in maintaining slavery. After pointing out that “our only enemies are the *petits blancs*,” Raimond asked the assembly, “These men, not taxpayers, strangers to the land where they live, will they be favored over useful men, born on the land, landowners, taxpayers?”<sup>245</sup> Historians have debated the exact nature of the *petits blancs* in Saint-Domingue, but Raimond’s use of the category of *petits blancs* as a foil to bring out the positive qualities of *hommes de couleur* highlights the importance of language in defining or even creating social groups and framing the situation for observers. Also, in contrast to the speech by Pétion discussed above, Raimond avoided the suggestion that free people of color should displace all whites—His goal was to see free people of color accepted as part of elite white society, not to overthrow it entirely.

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid, 400.

Following Raimond's speech, according to the report in the *Moniteur Universel*, the abbé Grégoire took the floor and announced that having decided the previous day to leave the initiative on "personnes non-libres" to the colonies, the assembly now had to take a vote on the status of free people of color, and he proposed that the assembly grant the rights of active citizenship to "les gens de couleur libres."<sup>246</sup> Several pro-colonial deputies responded to Grégoire and insisted that the initiative on the rights of free people of color also be given to the colonies, at which point a deputy named Rewbell revived the motion made the previous day by Roederer to grant political rights to *hommes de couleur* born to free parents. The *Moniteur Universel* reported that after receiving an unlikely endorsement from one of the colonial deputies, "the great majority of the *partie gauche* applauded and demanded to go to a vote" on the Rewbell motion.<sup>247</sup> Despite the objection of Barnave, who was shouted down, the motion passed as the May 15 law. The objection to the motion made by abbé Maury demonstrates that the Assembly was aware that the May 15 law, despite being based on the status of an individual's parents rather than color, favored mixed-race *hommes de couleur* at the expense of *nègres libres*. Maury argued that the law did not reflect proper moral values since it enfranchised *hommes de couleur* who owed "their existence to the most shameful prostitution," while continuing to exclude *nègres libres* who had earned their freedom through "their services."<sup>248</sup>

The May 15 law can be read as an endorsement of the way that lobbyists for free people of color framed and defined the situation in the colonies. Although the May 15

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> *Gazette nationale ou Le moniteur universel*, Lundi 16 Mai 1791, no. 136, 403.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid, 404.

law based political rights on the legal status of an individual's parents rather than "race" or phenotype, it effectively enfranchised *hommes de couleur* with European ancestry while continuing to exclude *nègres libres*. Thus, colonial racisms and color prejudices remained embedded in a language of equality and legal exclusion based on status. Although the May 15 law was quickly overturned and eventually replaced by more egalitarian legislation, the discursive situation it represents perhaps foreshadows the period of "mulatto oligarchy" in independent Haiti during the first half of the nineteenth century, which was justified by the ruling class's ties to a European cultural heritage and its role in igniting the Haitian Revolution by challenging white supremacy in colonial Saint-Domingue. In 1791, though, free men of color and their advocates had no intention of eliminating whites altogether to dominate colonial society alone. They wanted instead to share the privileges of whites while leaving the colonial order intact.



## Chapter Four: Competing Languages of Race in France and Saint-Domingue from May-September 1791

“The 15<sup>th</sup> of May, the day wherein you have reconquered your rights, must be forever memorable for you and your children.” –Abbé Grégoire, *Lettre aux citoyens de couleur* (1791)

The May 15, 1791 law, intended as a compromise measure to settle an issue that was both a source of division and a potential embarrassment to the principles of the National Assembly, proved instead to be extremely controversial and a source of even more bitter disputes on both sides of the Atlantic. Colonial interest groups fearful of the negative consequences of the law for colonial slave regimes mobilized to secure its revocation immediately after its passage. The colonial deputies themselves reacted by withdrawing from the Legislative Assembly the very next day. In letters to the president of the assembly explaining their decision to abstain from the proceedings, the deputies from Saint-Domingue, Martinique, and Guadeloupe stated that “the decree rendered yesterday on the state of *hommes de couleur* and *nègres libres* makes it impossible for us to assist in the sessions of the National Assembly.”<sup>249</sup> Even the Martinican deputy, Moreau de Saint-Mery, who in later years reflected with great pride on his role in the earliest days of the Revolution as the leader of the Electors of Paris, abdicated his duties.<sup>250</sup> Leaving the assembly, however, did not stop some of the colonial deputies from taking part in press battles over the May 15 law. A deputy representing Saint-Domingue, Gouy d’Arcy, lambasted a report appearing in the May 19, 1791 edition of the *Chronique de Paris* that criticized the behavior of the colonial deputies after the passage of the

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<sup>249</sup> *Copies exactes des lettres adressées au Président de l’Assemblée Nationale, par les Députés des Colonies.* n.p., n.d.

<sup>250</sup> Stewart Lea Mims, *Moreau de Saint-Méry’s American Journey* (New York: Doubleday, 1947), xiii.

controversial law and revived suspicions about the separatist aims of France's Caribbean colonies.

The supporters of the May 15 law responded with a lobbying campaign of their own. Two of the most influential advocates for racial equality, the abbé Grégoire and Julien Raimond, published letters addressed to free people of color in the colonies informing them of the new law and advising them on how to proceed under the new circumstances. Additionally, the assembly issued a formal statement on the motives that led to the May 15 law, which was drafted by Dupont de Nemours, and groups of interested citizens from France's maritime centers wrote addresses arguing for the positive effects of the new law. The discourse created by the supporters of the law shared some common themes: it reflected the idea of prejudice as an arbitrary social construction and a vision of "republican empire" which redefined the nation and how free people of color belong to it.

On May 20, the Amis des Noirs issued a statement in support of the May 15 law "in favor of the *hommes de couleur*."<sup>251</sup> Citing the commentaries on the law circulating in the French press and the numerous resolutions supporting the law issued by Jacobin clubs throughout France, the Amis des Noirs declared triumphantly that "We see with the sweetest satisfaction ... that the opinion of the Amis des Noirs is now the public opinion.... Yes, the cause of the *François mulâtres* is won."<sup>252</sup> The anti-slavery opinion of the Amis des Noirs had always been denounced by colonists as dangerous to the prosperity of France and to their own safety on plantations. During the height of

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<sup>251</sup> *Supplément nécessaire à l'adresse de la Société des Amis des Noirs. En faveur des hommes de couleur* (Paris, 20 Mai 1791)

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid*, 1-2.

Barnave's and the Colonial Committee's influence over how colonial issues were perceived by the National Assembly, the March 1790 decrees had not only secured the exclusive rights of colonial assemblies to decide the "status of persons," but also made it a crime to incite a slave uprising in the colony, which seemed to demonstrate that the cause of public opinion was not on the side of the Amis des Noirs. The Amis' rhetoric against slavery subsequently cooled down and the issue of political equality for free people of color became their primary focus. The passage of the May 15 law seemed to indicate that at last public opinion was now on the side of the Amis des Noir, vindicating a group that had routinely been dismissed as a bunch of dangerous fanatics by colonial interest groups.<sup>253</sup>

The Amis des Noirs' May 20<sup>th</sup> *Supplément* introduced a new development in the racialized terminology of the revolutionary period by consistently attaching "François" to their references to free people of color. The emphasis on the "Frenchness" of free people of color reflects a changing conception of citizenship and national belonging intended to support the logic of the May 15 law and the inclusion of previously disenfranchised groups on the basis of the principle of assimilation. With the gradual separation of the concepts of "race" and "nation" in the eighteenth-century,<sup>254</sup> revolutionaries drawing on the political philosophy of Rousseau were free to form a new understanding of the French nation as a voluntary community. Defined in that sense, race as lineage or descent was no longer at the core of national identity and belonging. Being "French" remained at the

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<sup>253</sup> *Correspondence secrète des députés de Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1789), 6-7; Rouvray, *De l'état des nègres* (Paris, 1789), 5.

<sup>254</sup> Nicholas Hudson, "From 'Nation' to 'Race': The Origin of Racial Classification in Eighteenth-Century Thought" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* vol. 29, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 247-264.

core of national identity; however, “Frenchness” itself became more about the assimilation of revolutionary values and French culture than race or blood. Hence, the consistent effort by the Amis des Noirs to emphasize the “Frenchness” of free people of color sought to legitimate their claims to full citizenship in the French nation based on new notions of who could belong to it. The “François mulâtres” and “François de couleur” conjured up in the Amis des Noirs’ *Supplément* had an equal claim as white Frenchmen to belonging to the French national community because they assimilated French cultural values. The reference by the Amis des Noirs to “François mulâtres” contrasts with earlier references by the Colons Américains to themselves as “Creoles.” Garrigus has explained the contradiction in public discourse about the identity of free people of color, pointing out that pamphlets written by free people of color in concert with their supporters in Paris and addressed to a metropolitan audience emphasized the “Frenchness” of free men of color to strengthen their claims for citizenship. However, pamphlets published by free men of color on their own tended to reflect a stronger self-identification as “Creoles” distinct from the French.<sup>255</sup>

While the Amis des Noirs’ endorsement of the May 15 law came as no surprise to anyone, the unequivocal support for the law coming from the municipality of Bordeaux—a maritime city economically dependent upon colonial trade—perhaps carried more weight in the court of public opinion than the rhetoric of a persistent pressure group with a clear agenda. At the end of May, the mayor and city council of Bordeaux issued a statement of support and goodwill for the colonies while also

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<sup>255</sup> Garrigus, “<<Des François qui gémissent sous le joug de l’oppression>>: Les libres de couleur et la question de l’identité au début de la Révolution française” in *Français? La nation en débat entre colonies et métropole, XVI-XIX siècle* (Paris: Éditions EHESS, 2014), 149-151.

criticizing colonial color prejudice and imploring white colonists to accept the May 15 law. Like the *Supplément* issued by the Amis des Noirs, though, the address from Bordeaux also implied that the acceptance of revolutionary political values was a more important marker of “Frenchness” than skin color. After paraphrasing the argument made by colonists on the necessity of maintaining free people of color as an intermediary class, the municipal officers of Bordeaux remarked that “it has always been impossible for us to recognize in this language that of Frenchmen ....”<sup>256</sup> The implication of this quote is that, in contrast to the view of most whites in the colony for whom “Frenchness” and belonging to the national community was determined *solely* by descent and ancestry, French identity and citizenship entailed assimilating revolutionary French cultural and political values.

The address from Bordeaux also commented on the nature of color prejudice in the colonies and echoed some of the same ideas first articulated in January 1791 by Julien Raimond in his pamphlet *Observations sur l'origine du préjugé*. The Bordeaux address asked rhetorically “Where has nature posed this barrier that some whites pretend to exist between them and the *hommes de couleur*?”<sup>257</sup> Like Raimond’s pamphlet, the Bordeaux address suggested that color prejudice was an artificial outgrowth of colonial society and, therefore, not a legitimate basis for exceptions to the equality guaranteed in the *Declaration of Rights*. Tracing the historical development of color prejudice, the pamphlet argued that “the *Code Noir* had ordered that all *affranchis* enjoy the same rights as the other citizens” but those rights were gradually chipped away in the colonies. The

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<sup>256</sup> *Adresse de messieurs les maire et officiers municipaux de la ville de Bordeaux, à messieurs composant les Assemblées coloniales, les Municipalités et les Comités dans les Colonies Françaises. Du 31 mai 1791* (Imprimerie de Patriote Française, 1791), 4.

<sup>257</sup> *Adresse ... de la ville de Bordeaux*, 6.

Bordeaux pamphlet also provides us with a fascinating explanation of how slavery gave rise to racism against all people of African descent regardless of their legal status. Anticipating the groundbreaking insights of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century anthropologist Ashley Montagu's *Man's Most Dangerous Myth* on the socially constructed nature of race and racism, the authors of the Bordeaux address argued that "The whites who were born in the colonies, surrounded by slaves, associated the idea of their color to the idea of inferiority and degradation that they would extend to all those who, without being slaves, had the same tint."<sup>258</sup> While this mentality with regard to the inferiority of all individuals with the "stain" of slavery was certainly prevalent in the French Antilles, the opposite side of the Janus face was also dominant over the colonial imagination: anyone sharing the same tint as the members of the master class were superior and, according to the logic of colonial society, the only individuals capable of wielding political power. By exposing color prejudice as an unnatural outgrowth of colonial society, the Bordeaux address attacked the primary pillar supporting white supremacy in the colonies and contributed to the growing opinion that free people of color had a legitimate right to exercise political power.

Nevertheless, the Bordeaux municipality's address conceded that there were conditions in which certain segments of the population could be denied the rights of active citizenship. As long as conditions were "uniform for all," exceptions "founded on the nature of things" could be made. While the context for this discussion was the provision of the May 15 law that restricted the extension of political equality to free people of color who were born to free parents, the reasoning behind it also applied to the

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid, 9.

French distinction between active and inactive citizens based on the amount of tax paid by an individual. The Bordeaux address argued that the May 15 law was justified and nondiscriminatory because it applied equally to free people of color and whites. Furthermore, “affranchis” (the segment of the free colored population born into slavery and left disenfranchised by the May 15 law) could legitimately be denied political rights because they were “degraded by servile habits” and thus remained “in a state of minority.”<sup>259</sup> The argument expressed here connects to the ascendancy of notions of regeneration and assimilation as the basis for inclusion in the nation and rights of citizenship. According to this reasoning, *affranchis* could legitimately be denied inclusion because they had not sufficiently assimilated.

The key revolutionary figure to advance the interrelated ideas of regeneration and assimilation, the abbé Grégoire, also weighed in on the May 15 law.<sup>260</sup> In his *Lettre aux citoyens de couleur et nègres libres de Saint-Domingue* written on June 8, Grégoire wrote: “You were men; you are now citizens, and reintegrated in the fullness of your rights, you will participate from now on in the sovereignty of the people.”<sup>261</sup> Reflecting on the monumental achievement represented by the May 15 law, Grégoire reminded his audience of how hard it was to achieve a decision in their favor and of the obstacles created by the colonial deputies. “The white colonists who were seated among us,” wrote Grégoire, “complained very strongly about ministerial tyranny, but they were careful not to talk of their own.”<sup>262</sup> Grégoire predicted that “posterity will be shocked, indignant

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>260</sup> Alyssa Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution: the Making of Modern Universalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>261</sup> Abbé Grégoire, *Lettre aux citoyens de couleur et nègres libres de Saint-Domingue, et des autres isles françoises de l'Amérique, 8 juin 1791* (Paris, 1791), 1.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid, 2.

maybe, that for five straight days we debated your cause, of which the justice is self-evident. Alas, when humanity is reduced to battling against the vanity of prejudice, its triumph is a painful conquest.”<sup>263</sup> Despite an uphill battle with intense opposition at every turn to the cause of free people of color in the colonies, “nothing could cool down our zeal nor that of your *sang-mêlés* brothers who are in Paris.” In an early reference shaping the historical memory of Julien Raimond, Grégoire cast him as the hero of the movement that stood up triumphantly for the revolutionary principle of equality against the entrenched prejudice and tyranny of colonial whites.<sup>264</sup>

Aside from recounting the heroic effort to secure political rights for an oppressed colonial group, though, Grégoire’s letter also exemplifies two characteristics of the rhetoric from supporters of the May 15 law during this period: the assertion that color prejudice was a social construction and a conception of citizenship based on assimilation. Grégoire and Raimond worked together in a joint effort to secure the rights of free people of color,<sup>265</sup> and Grégoire embraced Raimond’s argument that color prejudice was a historical development rather than an inherent or natural part of colonial society. He noted first of all that skin color was simply an arbitrary marker, commenting on the “absurdity” of “wanting to base merit on the nuances of the skin, on the tints more or less darkened of the face!” Following the assertions about East Indian colonial society made by a deputy from the Ile de France, Grégoire maintained that color prejudice of the sort found in the French Antilles “does not exist in our oriental colonies” to show that

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>265</sup> Raimond and Grégoire first met in October 1789, and Raimond convinced him to take up the cause of free people of color. Garrigus, “Opportunist or Patriot?” *Slavery and Abolition* Vol. 28, No. 1 (April 2007), 6; Florence Gauthier, *L’aristocratie de l’épiderme: Le combat des la Société des Citoyens de Couleur* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2007), 46.



prejudice in the West Indies was nothing but an arbitrary construction. Moreover, he cited several examples of noteworthy free colored cultural achievements to combat the idea of any sort of inherent inequality between individuals with different skin colors. “The Academy of Sciences of Paris,” noted Grégoire, “honors itself of counting in the number of its correspondents *un mulâtre* from the Ile de France; among us, an esteemed *nègre* is the administrator of the district of Saint-Hypolite in the department of the Gard.” Leaving no ambiguity about his views, Grégoire commented frankly that “we do not believe that differences of the skin can establish different rights between the members of the political society.”<sup>266</sup> Of course, this position left the door open for the establishment of different rights based on the legal status of the members of society.

Reflecting the principles of regeneration and assimilation at the core of his conception of revolutionary citizenship and a republican empire, Grégoire drew a connection between patriotism and devotion to the May 15 law. He asserted that “already the *colons blancs* who are worthy of being French have hastened themselves to recant ridiculous prejudices for not seeing among you than brothers and friends.”<sup>267</sup> The implication of the above statement is that one’s worthiness as a Frenchman is contingent upon accepting the May 15 law, which reveals the degree to which, in Grégoire’s conception at least, French identity and citizenship were shaped more by the assimilation of revolutionary ideals than race or lineage linked to the idea of blood purity. Essentially Grégoire suggests that free men of color such as Julien Raimond, who had at least some ancestors who were born in Africa but had also fully assimilated revolutionary values, were more worthy of belonging to the French nation than white colonists who rejected

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<sup>266</sup> Grégoire, *Lettre aux citoyens de couleur*, 8-9.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

revolutionary values but had “French blood”. The French Revolution’s reconception of Frenchness and national belonging was made possible by the separation of the concepts of “nation” and “race” during the eighteenth century. For much of the early modern period, the French concepts of “nation” and “race” were both tied to notions of blood or lineage, so membership to a “nation” implied shared bloodlines. With the separation of nation and race in the eighteenth century, “race” became a term to refer to a group sharing the same blood or heritage, while “nation” came to refer to a population sharing the same political and cultural system.<sup>268</sup> Hence, with the concept of nation divested of its ties to race, Grégoire could conceive of a national community to which belonging meant assimilating a core value system

Grégoire’s *Lettre aux citoyens de couleur* extended the logic of an assimilationist philosophy with regard to the nation and citizenship to reveal a picture of what a French republican empire would one day look like. Grégoire predicted that “one day deputies of color will cross the ocean in order to come sit in the national assembly, and swear with us to live and die under our laws.”<sup>269</sup> Grégoire’s vision came to fruition in 1793 when Jean-Baptiste Belley became the first black deputy elected to the French National Convention. Belley, himself a former slave, attended the session of the convention on 16 pluviôse an II (February 4, 1794) that culminated in the first abolition of slavery by a European colonial power.<sup>270</sup> As the situation was defined in May of 1791, though, Belley would have had neither his freedom nor the right to participate in French political life. For his part, Grégoire’s vision of a republican empire grounded in an assimilationist philosophy

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<sup>268</sup> Hudson, “From ‘Nation’ to ‘Race,’” 250-257.

<sup>269</sup> Grégoire, *Lettre aux citoyens de couleur*, 11-12.

<sup>270</sup> For more on the National Convention’s abolition decree and the speech by Louis Dufay (a white deputy from Saint-Domingue) that prompted it, refer to Jeremy Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 354-363.

helps explain his gradualist position on slavery in 1791 (as well as the limited enfranchisement granted to free people of color by the May 15 law), when most commentators believed that individuals like Belley who had been born into slavery were not equipped to handle immediate emancipation and the responsibilities of citizenship.<sup>271</sup> While acknowledging that in principle slaves, too, were “born and remain free and equal,” Grégoire maintained that perhaps the rights of citizenship “granted suddenly” to slaves “would be maybe for them a disastrous present.”<sup>272</sup> However, in time, with the inevitable “progression of enlightenment ... all peoples dispossessed from the domain of freedom will recoup this *inalienable* [italics in original] property.”<sup>273</sup>

The promise of assimilation would remain at the core of successive French attempts to reconcile imperialism and republicanism. The “mission civilisatrice” of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century French imperialism promised colonized populations that with assimilation would come greater incorporation into the French nation and more control over their destinies.<sup>274</sup> Even today, the idea of assimilation remains strong in the French imagination. The former colonies of Martinique and Guadeloupe have been designated as departments of France, and French Antilleans are struggling to confront the discrimination they face in their daily lives when France at large is reluctant to acknowledge problems of this sort due to the logic of assimilation.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Alyssa Sepinwall has explored the connection between Grégoire’s assimilationist perspective, his gradualist stance on the emancipation of slaves, and his advocacy of Jewish emancipation in “Eliminating Race, Eliminating Difference: Blacks, Jews, and the Abbé Grégoire,” *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall, eds. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 28-30.

<sup>272</sup> Grégoire, *Lettre aux citoyens de couleur*, 12.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>275</sup> David Beriss, *Black Skins, French Voices: Caribbean Ethnicity and Activism in Urban France* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), 54-61.

Two days following the Grégoire letter, Raimond and a few other free men of color in Paris drafted an address to their constituents in the colonies more conservative in tone than Grégoire's. Raimond's letter opened by reminding free men of color in the colonies of the "great obligations" to the nation that came with citizenship. "I know that they do not exceed your strength;" Raimond assured, "I know that they were always deeply engraved in your hearts, and that it suffices of indicating them to you so that you will fulfill them with the zeal that characterizes you."<sup>276</sup> The primary duty that newly enfranchised free men of color owed to the French nation was "to contribute with all of [their] means to the reestablishment of order and peace in the colonies."<sup>277</sup> For free men of color, contributing to order and peace meant forgetting "all the resentment that prolonged misfortunes and great injustices could give you."<sup>278</sup> The recourse to law rather than personal vengeance was a key part of demonstrating that free men of color had indeed assimilated revolutionary values and could take part in civil society. "It is up to you still to prove [to the nation] ...," advised Raimond, "that the restitution that has been made of your rights, that your elevation to the quality of citizen, will be the most fruitful source of the prosperity of the colonies."<sup>279</sup> Securing political rights for free people of color was a hard fought battle that was bitterly contested by whites who saw political rights for free people of color as the biggest threat to colonial stability, and Raimond's letter reveals a degree of anxiety about seeing the assembly's gamble and faith in his arguments vindicated.

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<sup>276</sup> *Lettre des commissaires des Citoyens de Couleur en France, à leurs frères et commettans dans les Isles Françaises* (Paris, 1791), 1.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

Raimond's emphasis on the need of free men of color to consistently prove themselves as citizens reflects a more conservative take on the revolutionary possibilities for an inclusive definition of "Frenchness" and national belonging than other commentators examined here. The address from the municipality of Bordeaux issued on May 31, for example, consistently referred to free men of color in the colonies as "François mulâtres" or "François de couleur". However, Raimond realized that the "Frenchness" of free people of color was contingent upon the current definition of the situation. Free men of color had been granted rights previously denied to them, and, if his constituents failed to demonstrate their worth, those rights could be taken away again. Raimond's conception of the nation and how free people of color belonged to it took this essential fact into account. He referred to France as "the great family ... which has adopted you."<sup>280</sup> Thus, in Raimond's conceptualization, free men of color were not *truly* French, as his allusion to adoption would suggest having been outside the "family" of the nation and then being brought into it.<sup>281</sup>

With regard to the limited enfranchisement granted by the May 15 law, Raimond's letter to his constituents takes a more conservative tack as well by offering words of consolation to the "affranchis" left disenfranchised. "Say to the *affranchis*," advised Raimond, "that if our advocates have not been as successful for them as for us, they have fought with the same zeal for everyone."<sup>282</sup> Rather than responding to the

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>281</sup> Raimond's perspective on free men of color as distinct from the French conforms to Garrigus' conclusions about the expression of "Creole" identity in pamphlets addressed to free men of color in Saint-Domingue. Garrigus, "<<Des François qui gémissent sous le joug de l'oppression>>" (Paris: Éditions EHESS, 2014), 151. Aletha Stahl has also read the construction of "Creole" identity in the colonial press. Stahl, "'Enfans de l'Amérique': Configuring Creole Citizenship in the Press, 1793" *Journal of Haitian Studies* Vol. 15, No. 1-2 (Spring-Fall 2009), 169-70.

<sup>282</sup> *Lettre des commissaires des Citoyens de Couleur*, 7.

injustice of their continued exclusion with a radical movement to secure their rights, Raimond suggests that *affranchis* in the colonies should be content with the efforts made on their behalf and to wait patiently for the “time of their political regeneration . . .”<sup>283</sup> While that time “was not very distant,” Raimond framed the enfranchisement of *affranchis* as a simple issue that depended upon their demonstrating their worthiness by “good morals, education, and by the progress of their industry and attachment to France.”<sup>284</sup> Raimond’s position on the exclusion of free men of color with enslaved parents betrays a conservative impulse to control or shape the behavior of *affranchis* in the interest, not of justice or the principles of revolution, but of protecting the position won by his group. However, as historian Florence Gauthier has observed, neither Raimond nor Grégoire were particularly enthusiastic about the Rewbell amendment to the May 15 law limiting enfranchisement to a portion of the free colored population.<sup>285</sup> Raimond, though, saw the necessity in making the most of the limited enfranchisement decree in hopes that subsequent amendments would expand the inclusiveness of the legislation.

While champions of the May 15 law such as Grégoire advanced an inclusive notion of Frenchness based on the concept of assimilation, their conception of the nation and citizenship did not go unchallenged. As a direct response to Grégoire’s *Lettre aux citoyens de couleur*, Charles de Chabannon, a colonial deputy from Saint-Domingue, published a pamphlet denouncing Grégoire’s representation of the situation in the colonies and attacking the validity of his doctrine of assimilation. Chabannon challenged

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> Gauthier, *L’aristocratie de l’épiderme*, 302-307.

Grégoire on almost every point raised in his *Lettre aux citoyens de couleur*, and he represents the intransigence of colonial whites in France in the face of the May 15 law and the type of bitter opposition to the law that would also be expressed by whites in Saint-Domingue.

Grégoire's and Chabannon's respective interpretation of the Ogé rebellion reveals an interesting point about the meaning of freedom in the metropole versus the colonial world. Grégoire had used the execution of Ogé following his failed movement to secure political rights for free men of color in late 1790 as an example of why the National Assembly needed to take action on the issue, and the representation of Ogé as a martyr who was sacrificed for the cause of freedom and liberty was crucial in turning public opinion away from support for the white colonists and toward support for the cause of free people of color. Chabannon, however, challenged the historical memory of Ogé created by Grégoire and other advocates for the men of color.

While Grégoire had insisted in his *Lettre aux citoyens de couleur* that Ogé had died because he wanted "to be free," Chabannon contended that "the *mulâtre* Ogé was free; it is not therefore for wanting to be free that he was killed on the wheel."<sup>286</sup> He blamed the "fanaticism of the sect of *amis des noirs*" for inspiring Ogé to return to Saint-Domingue, where he formed "a small army" that pillaged the North Province and murdered whites who stood in his way. "In his caste even," Chabannon asserted, "any *mulâtre* who refused to join his troop was murdered with his wife and his children."<sup>287</sup> A couple of important points emerge from Chabannon's challenge to Grégoire's

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<sup>286</sup> Charles de Chabannon, *Dénonciation de M. l'abbé Grégoire, et de sa lettre du juin 8 1791 ...* (Paris, 1791), 27.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

representation of Ogé as a heroic martyr. First, Chabannon's use of *mulâtre* to refer to Ogé highlights how opponents of the May 15 law and what it represented employed the colonial language of race as a political tool to undermine the discourse being formed by advocates of free people of color in the metropole. As noted earlier in the chapter, terminology such as "François de couleur" or "citoyens de couleur" emphasized the regeneration of free men of color and their belonging to the nation as Frenchmen and as citizens as part of a discourse of assimilation. By employing the colonial racist term "mulâtre," Chabannon emphasized the primacy of colonial racist labels that supported the racial hierarchy of colonial society by categorizing people according to descent. Secondly, Chabannon's portrayal of the situation reveals the cognitive divide separating the metropole and colonies at the time. In the colonial conception, Ogé had freedom—while he lacked political rights, he belonged to civil society, could own property, and seek justice in the courts. Indeed, Chabannon cited the ability of free people of color to initiate legal proceedings as evidence of the justice of colonial society, commenting that "it frequently happens that whites lose their cases against the *gens de couleur*."<sup>288</sup> For the metropole, though, freedom had evolved to mean more than the simple exercise of civil rights.

Significantly, Chabannon also attempted to undermine the doctrine of assimilation and membership in the fraternity of the nation that Grégoire extended to free people of color in the colony. In response to Grégoire's comment that men of color in the colonies should not see in France anything other than "fellow citizens, brothers, and friends," Chabannon remarked that "these alleged fellow citizens are Africans very happy to have

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid, 29.



been taken from their native country, where war and slavery are horrible.”<sup>289</sup> Aside from reviving stereotypical arguments about how blacks were better off as slaves in the New World than they would be in Africa, Chabannon’s statement conflates the issue of free people of color, to whom Grégoire’s statement applied, with that of the slaves. Furthermore, Chabannon dismisses the notion that people of color could be considered as “fellow citizens” with whites and rejects the extension of “Frenchness” to people of color, instead focusing on their supposed “Africanness” to undermine the idea that they could be assimilated to Europeans. Chabannon’s argument embraced a racist definition of the nation that rested on notions of blood purity embedded in the colonial language of race.

When news of the May 15 law finally arrived in Saint-Domingue at the end of June 1791, it unleashed panic in the city of Cap Français. The *Gazette de Saint-Domingue* reported that the arrival of the May 15 law and the May 20 address from the municipality of Bordeaux “caused a great fermentation throughout the city.”<sup>290</sup> The resolution in support of the law from the merchants of Bordeaux and their offer to send the Bordeaux National Guard to impose the law on the colonists would have no doubt seemed like the ultimate betrayal by a group with whom the colonists supposedly had common interests. Whites in Le Cap gathered to express their outrage at the news, and, according to reports, many people spoke of “sending back the first shipment of *Nègres* that entered in the port of Le Cap, [and] of breaking the cables of Bordelais ships.”<sup>291</sup> Other measures “at least as extreme” were proposed as well. The *Gazette de Saint-*

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> *Gazette de Saint-Domingue, politique, civile, économique et littéraire, et affiches américaines*, no 57 (Port-au-Prince, 1791), 717.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

*Domingue* depicts the whites of Le Cap navigating and negotiating the political symbols of the revolution, as it notes that “some wore the white cockade, others the black, and the greatest number rejected the national cockade without carrying any other.”<sup>292</sup>

While a sense of “desperation” pervaded over whites in the city, the “gens de couleur” appear to have feared that the passage of a law in their favor would provoke a violent response from whites. The *Gazette de Saint-Domingue* reported that local free men of color fled Cap Français, so in response the North Province’s Provincial Assembly issued an order placing “the *gens de couleur libres* under its immediate protection” and calling for them to return to the city and “their respective quarters.”<sup>293</sup> Embedded with a paternalistic language of race that asked free men of color to “regard all of the whites as [your] benefactors and [your] fathers,”<sup>294</sup> the Provincial Assembly’s order would most likely ring hollow for men who had witnessed the brutality carried out against Ogé.

The *Gazette de Saint-Domingue*’s coverage of the popular reaction to the May 15 law shows how the press could be mobilized in the interest of white supremacy by forming a conceptual world where resistance to the law seemed necessary and capable of producing the desired outcome. In its initial report on the unofficial arrival of the law in the colony, the *Gazette* reminded readers that the law had not yet been officially promulgated, which left “the time necessary for demonstrating to the National Assembly ... the inconveniences of the decree that had taken them by surprise.”<sup>295</sup> Additionally, a letter from Paris dated May 21 in the July 27 issue of the *Gazette* gave whites hope that if

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid, 717-718.

they continued to stall the execution of the May 15 law, it would only be a matter of time before the National Assembly reversed its decision. The May 15 law “was rendered in the tumult, in the convulsions, of these so-called *philosophes*, these fanatical apostles of humanity;”<sup>296</sup> however, according to the letter, “beginning the next day calm and reflection succeeded to the movements of passion and intrigue. Since this moment, there have been few sessions where the Assembly has not manifested regret for the conduct that it took on the 15<sup>th</sup>.”<sup>297</sup>

The rhetoric of those opposed to the law encouraged the intransigence of local whites by feeding their fears about the negative consequences of the law and by representing a united front of whites who would never accept the new situation. In the July 20 issue, for instance, the *Gazette* devoted three pages to printing the entire speech delivered by abbé Maury, a French deputy, against the proposed law during the May debates.<sup>298</sup> The same issue of the *Gazette* also ran an editorial against the May 15 law containing strong rhetoric intended to fan the flames of white resistance to free colored political quality. The editorial suggested that the May 15 law was merely the first salvo in an attack on the colonists’ property. “One day,” it warned, “our property, the fruit of many years of work, could be sacrificed to this impolitic philosophy, the shame of these ignorant fanatics.”<sup>299</sup> These “ignorant fanatics” in Paris “have raised this class of citizens who have neither the time, nor the knowledge necessary to comprehend the secret motives of those whose impulse they follow blindly.”<sup>300</sup> Revealing of how quickly

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<sup>296</sup> *Gazette de Saint-Domingue*, no. 60 (Mercredi 27 Juillet 1791), 744.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>298</sup> *Gazette de Saint-Domingue*, no. 58 (Mercredi 20 Juillet 1791), 727-730.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 731.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*

whites became entrenched on the issue of resisting any concessions to free people of color, the editorial implored whites to “refuse the execution of [the May 15 law], and prepare ourselves for the most vigorous resistance.”<sup>301</sup> By publishing editorials such as this and other similar reports, the *Gazette de Saint-Domingue* helped circulate a message of solidarity among whites and resistance to political equality for free people of color.

The Provincial Assembly of the North Province seated in Le Cap likewise reacted strongly upon receiving reports of the May 15 law. In a series of letters described by the *Gazette de Saint-Domingue* as an “example of moderation and prudence,”<sup>302</sup> the Provincial Assembly justified the color prejudice undermined by the May 15 law and challenged the assimilationist philosophy at the heart of the law. The Provincial Assembly’s letters—addressed to colonial deputies, the National Assembly, and other political groups in France—reveal the degree of panic induced by the shockwaves of the May 15 law. The assembly’s response to France was immediate and resolute. A letter to deputies from Saint-Domingue dispatched to France informed them that the “spirit” of opposition to the limited reforms of the May 15 law was universal “among the landowners of the colony.” “It would be useless to try to change it,” wrote the Provincial Assembly, “since this decree crumbles our property at its base.”<sup>303</sup> The same letter desperately asserted the assembly’s conviction that “it is important to the happiness of the colony that all of its inhabitants know that we are all lost if the decree of May 15 is executed here.”<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid, 732.

<sup>302</sup> *Gazette de Saint-Domingue*, no. 57 (Samedi 16 Juillet 1791), 718.

<sup>303</sup> *Adresse de l’assemblée provinciale du nord de Saint-Domingue, du 15 Juillet 1791, à l’assemblée nationale, au roi, aux 83 départemens, et au directoire du département de la Gironde, sur le Décret du 15 Mai, en faveur des hommes de couleur libres des Colonies.* ... (Paris, 1791), 3.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid, 4.

The Provincial Assembly made a utilitarian and historical argument for maintaining discrimination against people of African descent. Unwilling to abandon the colonial racialist mentality, the assembly recycled a classic argument employed by colonists since the beginning of the Revolution on the necessity of an intermediary class in the colony “between whites and slaves, which will make the latter imagine an immense space between themselves and whites.”<sup>305</sup> According to them, whites must have absolute superiority and control over the fate of people of African descent in the colony as a tool for maintaining social control in a slave society. The necessity of an intermediary class was demonstrated by Saint-Domingue’s history of remaining “until this day exempt from any insurrection of blacks.”<sup>306</sup> Based on these arguments, the Provincial Assembly asked the National Assembly to “revoke your decree of May 15, because it undermines the subordination of the slaves and puts the security of the colony in the most imminent danger.”<sup>307</sup>

In defending the color prejudice seen as the base of the slave regime, the Provincial Assembly rejected the doctrine of assimilation with regard to national belonging formed in revolutionary France. Denying that the color hierarchy formed in Saint-Domingue was the result of prejudice, its address to the king asserted that necessity “could not permit the *gens de couleur*, procreated by slaves, to enjoy the same rights as whites and be confused with them.”<sup>308</sup> Yet again, colonial whites ensconced themselves in the colonial language of race that placed primacy on blood or descent rather than

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid, 7-8.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid, 12-13.

embracing the revolutionary language of inclusion that emphasized the promise of assimilation. The determination of whites to resist the new order was so extreme that the Provincial Assembly promised any attempt to use force to enforce the law, as threatened by the Bordeaux national guard, would be regarded as an act of war “since there does not exist a white citizen in the colony who has not resolved to not accept a law entirely destructive to his property.”<sup>309</sup>

According to reports in the *Gazette de Saint-Domingue*, the Port-au-Prince municipal assembly was just as troubled by the May 15 law as the provincial assembly in Le Cap. The city council likewise drafted an address to the National Assembly voicing its opposition to the law on July 17. The address from Port-au-Prince, a city that would become an active bastion of white resistance to racial equality, noted the “despair” that had overcome the city’s inhabitants upon learning of the National Assembly’s new law and it advanced a defense of racial prejudice as a natural outgrowth of colonial society. Counter to Julien Raimond’s argument that color prejudice was an artificial social construction, the Port-au-Prince address maintained that “a new caste” between “blacks and whites” arose from the “state of nature” of the colony that owed its existence and wealth to “the love, benevolence, and generosity of the *colons*.”<sup>310</sup> This argument relied on long-standing perceptions and stereotypes concerning the source of free colored prosperity that Raimond himself had tried to dismiss when presenting his argument for the utility of free men of color to colonial society.<sup>311</sup> Raimond had argued that wealthy free men of color were by and large self-made individuals who prospered due to hard

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>310</sup> *Gazette de Saint-Domingue*, no 60 (Mercredi 27 Juillet 1791), 748.

<sup>311</sup> Raimond, *Observations sur l’origine du préjugé*, 31-32.

work, wise investments, and frugal living. Garrigus's research on free colored networks in the South Province of Saint-Domingue has confirmed Raimond's assertion about the origins of free colored wealth.<sup>312</sup>

Toward the end of August, reports regarding the reaction to the May 15 law in Saint-Domingue began to trickle back to France. On August 22, a letter from the governor of Saint-Domingue, General Blanchelande, arrived describing the alarming reaction of whites in Cap Français and his belief that it would be dangerous to try to execute the law with the colony in such an agitated state. The members of the assembly who had advocated for a measure in favor of free men of color responded to this news by blaming the agitation on letters written by the colonial deputies to their constituents rather than on the May 15 law itself.<sup>313</sup> Nevertheless, these reports on the negative effects of the May 15 law on Saint-Domingue's volatile society reflect the growing momentum of the movement to have the law repealed.

Further momentum against the May 15 law was provided by the pressure placed on France's maritime centers by colonists and colonial sympathizers in France. The Bordeaux municipal government had been an energetic supporter of the May 15 law, and as soon as word reached back to France about the firestorm unleashed in Saint-Domingue over the law, lobbyists began to pressure the commercial leaders of Bordeaux to advance the repeal of the controversial legislation. A certain J. Brard, who identified himself as a planter from the North Province of Saint-Domingue, wrote to the Bordeaux chamber of commerce about what he had heard from his contacts about the dire situation in the

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<sup>312</sup> Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 66.

<sup>313</sup> *Lettre de M. de Gouy, Député de Saint-Domingue, à l'Assemblée nationale. Paris, ce 23 Août 1791* (n.p., n.d.), 1-2.

colony. He announced to the merchants of Bordeaux that “if ever an event has merited your attention, that which passes today in Saint-Domingue must secure it absolutely.”<sup>314</sup> Reviewing the litany of disturbing events in the colony, Brard noted that the “national cockade was trampled underfoot” and that “Messieurs l’abbé Grégoire, Robespierre, Dupont de Nemours, and some others, were hanged in effigy.”<sup>315</sup> Given the demonstrations and outrage of colonial whites, Brard predicted that “Saint-Domingue is lost for France if it does not annul the decrees of 13 and 15 May.”<sup>316</sup>

Brard’s criticism of the May laws highlight the importance of issues regarding language and terminology to commentators of the time. The May 13 law had affirmed the right of colonial governments to legislate on the status of “non-libres” individuals. The term “non-libre” was used instead of “esclave” due to dissent in the National Assembly against making “slave” part of the French constitution. Robespierre’s opposition to the Martinican deputy Moreau de Saint-Méry’s suggestion that the word “esclave” be used prompted his famous declaration, “Perish the colonies, rather than a principle!” And, indeed, Brard cited Robespierre’s declaration as evidence that colonists should legitimately fear the revolutionary French government’s resolve to put its principles above all other considerations.<sup>317</sup> Brard insisted that the choice in terminology of “non-libres” over “esclave” put “between the hands of the slaves the dagger which would be used to massacre the whites.”<sup>318</sup> He advocated instead that the term “non-libres” be replaced by “Nègres et Mulâtres esclaves.” According to Brard, the change in

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<sup>314</sup> *Discours prononcé au commerce de Bordeaux assemblée; par M. J. Brard, Habitant de la partie du Nord de Saint-Domingue, actuellement à Bordeaux, le 23 Août 1791* (n.p., n.d.), 2.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid*, 7-8.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid*, 6.



terminology would convince slaves that their “situation is a legal state.” Brard’s need to include a direct reference to “Mulâtres esclaves” reflects anxiety over proposals by gradual emancipationists to free all slaves with white fathers as the first step in a plan for the eventual abolition of slavery.<sup>319</sup>

Finally, Brard’s address to the merchants of Bordeaux shows how white colonists contested the assimilationist doctrine of Grégoire by continuing to insist that descent be the primary determinant of one’s standing in colonial society. “If ... one puts the *affranchis* or their descendants next to whites, [and] makes them their equal” argued Brard, “this rapprochement would be the loss of the subordination of the slaves, the loss of the colony would follow.”<sup>320</sup> Whether insisting on the importance of explicitly using the word “slave” or undermining an inclusive discourse by emphasizing the separateness of *affranchis* and their descendants, Brard’s address contested the language of the May 15 law’s supporters in order to justify denying any free people of color access to social and political power.

In Marseille, too, news of the agitation potentially unsettling to Saint-Domingue’s social order created a panic about the future of the colony and French commerce. From the start, asserted the merchants of Marseille in an address to the National Assembly, the May 15 law had placed them “in the most profound state of sorrow” and left them convinced that promulgating the law in the colony would bring about “the horrors of civil war.”<sup>321</sup> The Marseille merchants argued that in this case the principles of the

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<sup>319</sup> Plans for the gradual abolition of slavery that began with the emancipation of all “mulâtres esclaves” had been suggested as early as 1789. Yves Benot has examined the arguments for and against gradual abolitionist programs proposed from 1789-1791 in *La révolution française et la fin des colonies* (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 1989), 103-33.

<sup>320</sup> *Discours prononcé au commerce de Bordeaux assemblée*, 6-7.

<sup>321</sup> *Adresse du Commerce de Marseille à l’assemblée nationale. Du 2 Septembre 1791* (n.p.; n.d.), 2.

revolutionary government should be sacrificed to the interests of commerce because “in the current state of Europe, one must maintain, favor, and extend commerce or resolve themselves to quickly becoming the tributaries of other states.”<sup>322</sup> Sacrificing the liberty of slaves and the equality of free men of color was necessary, in their view, to protect commerce and, thereby, secure the “joyful liberty” of France.<sup>323</sup> While a notion of republican empire would later develop that justified the possession of colonies by the extension of French principles to them, the view of nation and empire in the Marseille address implied that the colonies were not really part of the nation and were only meant to serve the nation.

The defense of prejudice in colonial society made in the address from Marseille attempted, as seen in previous documents, to appeal to pragmatic concerns about stability and productivity in order to defend a social order counter to revolutionary ideals. White superiority in Saint-Domingue was not “a prejudice that philanthropy can combat,” as “the separation of whites and *hommes de couleur*” is supported by the “imperious law of necessity.” Defending social inequality in the language of necessity, the Marseille address argued that whites in the colonies must be able to “imprint on themselves a character of ineffaceable superiority [in order to] assure the subordination absolutely necessary to tranquility and to submission to the law.”<sup>324</sup> It also offered an apocalyptic vision of how a redefinition of the situation could destroy everything in the colonies. “If the *nègres* see the *hommes des couleur* become the equal of whites, they will begin to recognize their own force, from there indiscipline, trouble, discord, [and] inflamed

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid, 2-3.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

passions will bring desolation to all our colonies.”<sup>325</sup> Written on September 2, 10 days following the start of the August 23 slave uprising in Saint-Domingue’s North Province, the document predicted that “a bunch of Frenchmen will be prey to the barbarism of their slaves; excited to plunge their hands into the blood of their masters, they will know neither fear nor subordination.”<sup>326</sup> However, unaware of the August 23 slave uprising that would totally transform the colony, the Marseille merchants predicted that hope remained to avert these disasters by reaffirming the colonial racist hierarchy that valued the purity of “white blood” and European descent above all else.

A couple of weeks later, in response to the reports coming from Saint-Domingue on the increasing hostility between whites and free people of color and the pressure coming from French commercial interest groups, the four Committees of the Constitution, of the Marine, of Agriculture and Commerce, and of the Colonies reunited to deliberate on the situation since the passage of the May 15 law. Their deliberations provide an indication of how public discourse functioned in the political culture of the French Revolution. The report began by assessing the landscape of public opinion, promising to “distribute to the home of each of the members of the Assembly a literal excerpt of the petitions, addresses, letters and other pieces” relative to the May 15 law.<sup>327</sup> It noted that several addresses from Bordeaux and the department of the Gironde expressed support for the law since it “consecrated again the rights of all free men.”<sup>328</sup> However, the report also summarized several petitions from various commercial and

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>327</sup> *Délibération des quatre Comités de Constitution, de Marine, d’Agriculture et Commerce, et des Colonies. Du 12 Septembre 1791* (n.p.; n.d.), 1.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid, 3.

maritime centers of France expressing opposition to the law, in which it emphasized the number of signatories on each document. For instance, 102 “citizen merchants from Nantes” voiced their protest to the law, and ninety-four “merchants, ship captains, and citizens from the city of Havre” confessed that, while they felt reassured about the “joyful effects” of the October 12 decree reiterating the right of colonial governments to legislate on the “status of persons,” the most recent decree “on the *gens de couleur* filled them with terror.”<sup>329</sup> Drafting petitions such as these was one of the primary means to circulate opposition or consent to the actions of the government in the political culture of the French Revolution. Through them, signatories staked a claim on an issue, exercising their political voice. The report made by the four committees indicates their importance in legitimizing a political position and how they could be utilized in political contests.

When the May 15 law was originally debated, the Committees of the Constitution, of the Marine, of Agriculture and Commerce, and of the Colonies, led by Barnave, had vehemently opposed passing the law, and, over the course of their deliberations in September 1791, the four committees marshalled evidence streaming in from Saint-Domingue on the reception of news of the May 15 law there to generate momentum for the movement in the metropole to have the law revoked. Their summary of deliberations quoted a letter from Governor Blanchelande dated July 3 in which he indicated that “the wisest and the most coldly rational colonists are convinced that the submission of the blacks” depends upon an intermediary class.<sup>330</sup> A letter from the Conseil Supérieur du Cap to a colonial deputy subsequently forwarded to the Colonial Committee warned

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid, 7-8.

those in France that “you do not have any idea of the violent propositions made against the *gens de couleur* and against France.”<sup>331</sup> Another letter from Governor Blanchelande dated two weeks after the first one informed the Naval Ministry of the steps being advocated by the Provincial Assembly of Saint-Domingue’s North Province. The Provincial Assembly was calling for new elections by the 20<sup>th</sup> of July in order to evade the execution of the May 15 law as it was unlikely that it would have officially been promulgated by that date. Blanchelande ended his letter by expressing conviction that the law could not be peacefully executed in Saint-Domingue. These reports from the colony combined with petitions from around France calling for the suspension or outright repeal of the May 15 law provided the basis for reopening the issue.

The September debates over the May 15 law initiated by the report by the four committees led the contestation of the doctrine of assimilation embedded in colonial discourse to find its way into metropolitan discourse as well. The Martinican deputy Moreau de Saint-Méry took advantage of the growing momentum against the May 15 law to launch his own attack on the law the day following the report of the four committees in a letter to the editor of *La Feuille du Jour*. Saint-Méry indicated that resistance to assimilation was at the heart of the issue for many white colonists when, in responding to a deputy from the Ile de France who supported the May 15 law, he disputed the deputy’s claim that “his constituents desired the assimilation of the *affranchis* to the whites ...”<sup>332</sup> Without challenging the revolutionary principle of assimilation as applied in metropolitan society, Barnave’s September 23 report to the National Assembly on the deliberation of

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>332</sup> Quoted in Pierre Monneron, *Sur les gens de couleur. Observations sur une lettre de M. Moreau de Saint-Méry, Député de la Martinique à l’Assemblée Nationale, écrite le 13 Septembre dernier au Rédacteur de la Feuille du Jour* (Paris, 1791), 4.

the four committees two weeks earlier did contest the relationship between nation and empire assumed in the assimilationist doctrine behind the May 15 law. Barnave argued European colonies had always been governed by two separate regimes: exterior and interior laws. “This distinction exists,” Barnave maintained, “because it is founded on the very nature of things” as “the remoteness of the colonies from the European nations to which they are linked, and the localities and circumstances which differentiate them from the European regime, have required everywhere the establishment of a local means of making these [interior] laws.”<sup>333</sup> Barnave advised that the May 15 law be revoked and a decree affirming the right of colonial governments to make laws for the interior governance of the colony be passed instead.

His report precipitated the September 24 law that ended, for the time being, France’s brief experiment with a colonial policy aimed at assimilation. Adopting the language used by Barnave in his report the previous day, the September 24 law “decreed as a constitutional article for the colonies” that “the National Assembly will rule exclusively ... on the exterior regime of the colonies,” meaning that “laws concerning the status of non-free persons and the political state of *hommes de couleur et nègres libres* ... will be made by the colonial assemblies currently assembled or to be assembled...”<sup>334</sup> Interestingly, the assembly’s retreat from a policy of assimilation with regard to free people of color in the colonies led to a revival of the colonial racialist term “*hommes de couleur et nègres libres*.” Whereas in the wake of the May 15 law a language conveying

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<sup>333</sup> Antoine Barnave, *Rapport fait à l’Assemblée nationale, sur les colonies, au nom des Comités de Constitution, Marine, d’Agriculture et Commerce, et des Colonies. Le 23 Septembre 1791* (Paris, 1791), 6-7.

<sup>334</sup> *Décret de l’Assemblée nationale, du 24 Septembre 1791* quoted in *Loi relative aux Colonies. Donnée à Paris, le 28 Septembre 1791* (Gap, 1792), 1-2.

the assimilation of free men of color by emphasizing their “Frenchness” found expression in the discourse supporting the law, four months later the French assembly once again embraced colonial racialist language that sought to control access to power based on descent.

Meanwhile, free men of color forced their own language of race on whites in the West Province of Saint-Domingue, generating a racialist language in colonial public discourse more egalitarian than contemporary language in France. Once whites in Saint-Domingue refused to recognize the May 15 law, free men of color took steps to organize their own collective political movement in July 1791. In early August 1791, free men of color from Croix-des-Bouquets and Mirebalais elected a council of forty men to represent them with Pierre Pinchinat serving as president. On August 11, the council petitioned Governor Blanchelande asking him to fully execute the May 15 law. However, as we have seen, Governor Blanchelande was convinced that it would be imprudent and practically impossible to enforce the law given the intransigence of whites in Saint-Domingue. He returned a response on August 22 that condemned the assembly formed by free men of color and asked them to wait patiently for “their white benefactors” to decide their political fate.<sup>335</sup>

As free men of color began to organize in the West, events in the North Province would turn the political situation in the colony upside down. On the night of August 22, 1791, slaves on several plantations in the parish of Acul rose in revolt, setting fire to the cane fields and plantation buildings. Under the leadership of a slave named Boukman, the insurrection spread throughout Acul and to neighboring parishes as well. Large bands

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<sup>335</sup> Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 118-119.

of insurgent slaves moved throughout the North Plain surrounding Le Cap, burning plantations, attacking whites, and recruiting new followers. The size of the revolt grew quickly. Within a week, the number of revolting slaves rose from an estimated 2,000 to 10,000.<sup>336</sup>

The decision of slaves in the North Province to band together and pursue their own interests and goals as an autonomous force dramatically changed the political landscape of Saint-Domingue. The immediate concern of whites in the North Province became suppressing the revolt. The fear and racial hatred of Le Cap's whites made free people of color the targets of arbitrary arrests and executions for suspected involvement in plotting with the revolting slaves. The Colonial Assembly condemned those arrests and tried to quell the racial violence, realizing the necessity of the support of free people of color in fighting the revolt, although it was still not willing to concede political rights to them. Free men of color in the North Province were in the difficult position of pressing for rights while also helping combat the slave uprising. In Port-au-Prince, too, word of the revolt in the North inflamed the animosity of whites toward free people of color, leading to similar episodes of racial violence as in Le Cap. Pinchinat and the free men of color under his leadership responded to these events by informing the colonial governor of their intention to arm themselves and defend against attack from the hostile white faction in Port-au-Prince.<sup>337</sup>

Pinchinat and Bauvais organized a military campaign from their base in the Charbonnière Mountains outside Port-au-Prince to secure recognition of the May 15 law

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<sup>336</sup> Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard Press, 2004), 94-97.

<sup>337</sup> Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 120.



by force. On September 2, the first engagement between the free colored army and white National Guard units from Port-au-Prince occurred at Croix-des-Bouquets.<sup>338</sup> In their fight against the *petits blancs*, identifying themselves as “patriots,” who controlled Port-au-Prince, the West Province’s free men of color found an ally in the royalist *grand blanc* planters led by Hanus de Jumeourt.<sup>339</sup> While exceedingly hostile to the idea of political equality for free men of color, the *petit blanc* “patriots” who dominated the municipal government of Port-au-Prince claimed to support the Revolution because of the empowerment that representative government gave to them.<sup>340</sup> On the other hand, *grand blanc* royalists feared that the French Revolution would ultimately threaten the institution of slavery on which their prosperity depended and the North Province’s slave uprising convinced them to side with free people of color to prevent the spread of the revolt to the West. Free men of color were, thus, able to take advantage of the political divisions among whites to advance their own claims to power.

The increased political leverage of free men of color in the West led to the emergence of an egalitarian language of race in colonial public discourse. Due to Bauvais’ victories over the Port-au-Prince National Guard in early September and the urgent need for the support of free men of color against the slave uprising in the North Province, white authorities were pressed to reconsider their earlier intransigence with regard to the May 15 law. Prior to their decisive defeats in September 1791, the white “patriots” dominating politics in Port-au-Prince had circulated a declaration addressed

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid, 121. Thomas O. Ott, *The Haitian Revolution, 1789-1804* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1973), 51.

<sup>340</sup> Charles Frostin, *Les révoltes blanches à Saint-Domingue aux XVII et XVIII siècles* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008), 236.

specifically to the “gens de couleur libres” of Port-au-Prince offering them protection provided that they “retain for the whites, their legitimate patrons, the respect which is due to them.”<sup>341</sup> As free men of color and their allies accrued victories over white forces in early September, the dismissive and paternalistic language from the above declaration gave way to a language of race that placed free people of color on an equal level with whites.

The egalitarian language emergent with the elevated political position of free men of color in the West is best seen through the concordats signed between the free colored armies and the white “patriot” armies. The initial peace treaties negotiated between whites and free people of color were worked out on September 7 for Croix-des-Bouquets and Mirebalais and September 11 for Port-au-Prince, and they provided assurances that whites would recognize and accept the May 15 law as well as take measures toward its implementation.<sup>342</sup> The negotiations provided the leaders of the free men of color with their first opportunity to force whites to address them on equal terms and to dictate a new language of race in public discourse.

The language of the September 11 concordat placed whites and free men of color on an equal level by using the parallel terms “citoyens blancs” and “citoyens de couleur” to refer to each group.<sup>343</sup> The consistent reference to “citoyens de couleur” also legitimized the rights for which Pinchinat and his followers were claiming. The concordat reveals the dramatic effect the slave uprising had on the political environment in the West Province. The concordat’s preamble noted that the representatives of the

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<sup>341</sup> *Gazette de Saint-Domingue*, no 69 (Samedi 27 Août 1791), 835.

<sup>342</sup> Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 121.

<sup>343</sup> *Gazette de Saint-Domingue*, no 76 (Mercredi 21 September 1791), 893.

“citoyens blancs” and “citoyens de couleur” had assembled “to the effect of deliberating on the most capable means of achieving the reunion of the citizens of all classes, and of arresting the progress and the consequences of an insurrection that equally menaces all parts of the colony.”<sup>344</sup> Fear of the slave uprising spreading beyond the North Province drove whites to the negotiating table and gave free people of color an immense amount of political leverage.

Negotiating from a position of strength, free men of color were able to dictate terms to the whites of Port-au-Prince. The “citoyens de couleur” announced that “the desire of achieving the reunion of all citizens indistinctly made them favorably welcome the deputation of white commissioners from the National Guard of Port-au-Prince.” With a “satisfaction difficult to express,” the “citoyens de couleur” praised the “return of the *citoyens blancs* to the true principles of reason, justice, humanity, and healthy politics.”<sup>345</sup> Thus, in September 1791, free people of color possessed enough political leverage in the West Province to force white leaders to publicly accept an egalitarian language and discourse, while at the same time in France the assembly was reverting to a colonial racialist language as it revoked the May 15 law, unaware of either the slave uprising or the newly signed concordat.

In the wake of the May 15 law, its supporters in France circulated a rhetoric of assimilation that emphasized the “Frenchness” of free people of color in the colonies. The power of the assimilationist discourse lay in its implication that citizenship and national belonging depended upon the adoption of revolutionary French values rather than one’s blood or descent. With this inclusive definition of the nation, free people of

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

color were more worthy of citizenship than whites in the colony who clung to an exclusionary racialist view based on descent that was totally at odds with revolutionary ideals. The discursive situation shaped by supporters of the May 15 law, such as Grégoire and Raimond, was contested by whites in the colony and their supporters in France. Playing on the concerns aroused in France by the alarming reaction of Saint-Domingue's white population to news of the May 15 law, pressure groups successfully lobbied the National Assembly to reverse its landmark decision in September 1791. With the revocation of the May 15 law, the French government embraced once again the discursive situation framed by white colonists that privileged blood and descent above all else through the use of racialist terminology as a management device to determine who had legitimate access to power. At the same time that the language of race in France took a step backward, free men of color in Saint-Domingue advanced a more revolutionary language of race and notion of political equality than that of the May 15 law through the September 11 concordat negotiated with whites. The discursive situation defined by the concordat would not be embraced by the French government until the passage of the April 4, 1792 law.

## **Chapter Five: The Disavowal of Race in France and Saint-Domingue, 1791-1792**

The September 11 concordat negotiated between white National Guard units based at Port-au-Prince and the free colored army camped at Croix de Bouquets signaled the increased political leverage of free people of color in Saint-Domingue. With the combination of the National Assembly's official sanction of political equality for some free people of color and the August 23 slave revolt raging in the colony's North Province, free colored political leaders Pierre Pinchinat and Louis-Jacques Bauvais were able to force concessions that went beyond the May 15 law from white political leaders in Port-au-Prince who had previously sworn to maintain white supremacy at all costs. Despite the successes won by free colored leaders in September 1791, they found themselves on the defensive in press battles over the free people of color issue. Publicly, the leaders of the free colored political movement had to navigate a precarious position of pledging their loyalty to the slave regime while also leveraging their support in fighting the slave revolt for political gains.

Public discourse served as the arena in which competing assertions of truth battled to frame the social and political situation in Saint-Domingue. In deconstructing the language expressed by prominent free colored leaders in the newspaper press, we see how they sought to make certain claims about the reality of the situation, primarily that a group known as "citoyens de couleur" existed as a unified, self-conscious entity working toward the same goal of achieving political equality with whites. The political and social divisions within the colony according to race were reinforced through public language that gave expression to racial categories, thereby making them real, in a sense, by giving form and substance to an otherwise arbitrary and nebulous distinction. With the triumph

of free men of color on both sides of the Atlantic during the summer of 1792, a race neutral language emerged that sought to erase racial categories as an aspect of public discourse as part of the effort to form an egalitarian society in line with the April 4, 1792 law granting political rights to free people of color.

As a sign of the changing political position of free people of color, more free colored voices began to enter colonial public discourse during the fall of 1791. Despite the peace agreement made between the white radicals of Port-au-Prince and the free colored army camped at Croix-des-Bouquets, tensions and mutual distrust remained between the two sides, and the press became an important arena for the leaders of the free colored political movement to publicly defend themselves by publicizing their perspective on the failure of the truce. Early signs of lingering hostility between the two camps began to appear in the *Gazette de Saint-Domingue* shortly after the promulgation of the September concordat. In a letter to the editor, Pinchinat complained that the copies of the concordat printed for public distribution were riddled with grammatical and wording errors. He insinuated that the errors were an intentional show of disrespect and contempt for the agreement supposedly uniting whites and free people of color.<sup>346</sup> Pinchinat's need to publicly address the situation through the press speaks to his perception of the importance of public discourse. He recognized that language and the access to shape or influence public language mattered. Through an act of publicly "correcting" the error, Pinchinat staked a claim to the authority of free colored leaders to control the public message about the concordat. Pinchinat's letter, dated September 22, was printed during a favorable political context for his group in the West Province

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<sup>346</sup> *Gazette de Saint-Domingue*, no. 77 (Samedi 24 Septembre 1791), 903.

immediately following a series of victories over whites. Although at the same time in France, Barnave secured the revocation of the May 15 law, free men of color in Saint-Domingue, unaware of the reversal due to the two month delay in news crossing the Atlantic, used the changing political situation to gain unprecedented access to influence the representation of events in public discourse.

Over the following weeks, Pinchinat shared with the press several letters that he had exchanged with the leaders of Port-au-Prince's all-white civil and military administration. The letters were an attempt to frame the collapse of the concordats and the continuation of hostilities. In a letter to the editor of the *Gazette de Saint-Domingue*, written September 30, Pinchinat asked the editor to print the correspondence, noting the importance that "the colony be instructed of the sentiments and principles of the *citoyens de couleur*, camped at Croix-des-Bouquets."<sup>347</sup> The letters that Pinchinat requested be publicized reflected disagreement between the two sides over what executing the concordats entailed, and, from Pinchinat's perspective, they justified his refusal to disband the army at Croix-des-Bouquets by making the bad faith of the whites in Port-au-Prince part of the public record.

The press also served as an arena to represent free men of color as a unified group in the colony's larger political and social context. Two of the most prominent free colored leaders, Bauvais and Andre Rigaud, took to the press to refute assertions of divisions between free men of color from different parishes over the tactics employed by the army at Croix-des-Bouquets. In response to the circulation of a pamphlet titled *Reproaches made by the men of color of Mirebalais to those of Port-au-Prince and*

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<sup>347</sup> *Gazette de Saint-Domingue*, no. 80 (Mercredi 5 Octobre 1791), 929-930.

*Croix-des-Bouquets*, Bauvais and Rigaud expressed their “sovereign contempt for this writing ...” and implied that the pamphlet was forged by stating that “all the members representing the citizens of color of the quarter of Mirebalais” had signed their denunciation.<sup>348</sup> The fact that Bauvais and Rigaud used the newspaper press to refute assertions of discord among Saint-Domingue’s free people of color indicate the perceived importance of public discourse in framing the colony’s political situation. These two leaders of the armed free men of color felt it was important to make a public display of unity to increase their political leverage in dealing with whites and to legitimate their claim to represent free people of color as a whole. The public perception that free men of color were not united in their effort to secure political concessions from white leaders was dangerous for the free colored political movement because it would likely encourage white political leaders to stall or dig in their heels hoping to exacerbate divisions among free people of color.

Another example of how groups of free men of color used the press to shape the public perception of their group comes from a municipality in the South Province called Cayemittes. In response to the municipal government’s decision to allow free men of color to arm themselves in case the North Province’s slave uprising spread to the South Province, the “gens de couleur libres” of Cayemittes submitted an address to the municipality pledging their devotion to “defending the common cause ....”<sup>349</sup> In the process, the free men of color of Cayemittes made a fascinating statement that provides insight into their own conception of free colored identity. “In vain the ill-intentioned

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<sup>348</sup> *Gazette de Saint-Domingue* no. 81 (Samedi 8 Octobre 1791), 941.

<sup>349</sup> *Supplément à la Gazette de Saint-Domingue*, no. 59 (Mercredi 28 Septembre 1791), 915.



would have liked to make believe that we still have an inclination for the people of Africa,” they asserted, “the blood that flows in our veins is the blood of the people of Europe transplanted in America, and we are ready to sacrifice our lives to maintain this principle of ourselves.”<sup>350</sup> Issued in the context of the threat of slave uprising and civil war between whites and free people of color, the above statement reveals how the political environment of September-October 1791 came to bear on assertions of free colored identity. The above identity claim made by the free men of color of Cayemittes publicly announced their loyalty to Saint-Domingue’s slave regime and sought to publicly distance the “gens de couleur libres” from both the enslaved population and the free black population. The language used by the free men of color in their address embraced the colonial racist mentality that defined an individual’s identity primarily according to descent. As a group, free men of color stressed the primacy of the “European blood” in their veins in asserting their identity, placing themselves in white society. This emphasis on descent and the importance of European ancestry by the free men of color of Cayemittes came at a time when people of color in the West Province were advancing a language that disavowed race.

The process of framing free people of color as a group in public discourse was shaped by the speech acts of white political leaders as well. The same issue of the *Gazette de Saint-Domingue* that printed the note from Bauvais and Rigaud also included a proclamation from Governor Blanchelande. Blanchelande’s proclamation acknowledged the May 15 law and the constitutionality of the “rights of the *hommes de couleur libres*,” but it positioned the groups of armed men of color in the West Province

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<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

who had actually forced recognition of the May 15 law as outside the bounds of the law. Addressing himself to “all the *hommes de couleur libres*, who are currently armed and reunited in order to maintain unconstitutional pretensions beyond the decrees,” Blanchelande called on them to “retire with their arms to their respective parishes, [and] contribute there to the defense of the common cause, with the zeal of which their brothers of the North, South, and part of the West Provinces have given them the example.”<sup>351</sup> He also ordered them to obey the existing representative assemblies (which had been elected by an all-white electorate) “... like all the other citizens of the colony ....”<sup>352</sup> Finally, Blanchelande insinuated that only by following these orders could “they show themselves worthy of the benefaction of the senate of France ....”<sup>353</sup> Overall, then, Blanchelande framed the armed movement among free men of color in the West Province as illegitimate and unconstitutional.

As the September concordat continued to deteriorate throughout the month of October, a press battle emerged to assign blame for the collapse of the agreements and the continuation of hostilities. On October 12, the commander of Port-au-Prince’s white National Guard units, M. Caradeux, published two separate letters addressed to the “white citizens” of Croix-des-Bouquets and the armed “citizens of color” respectively. Each letter reiterated the desire of whites in Port-au-Prince to maintain peace. In his letter to the “white citizens” of Croix-des-Bouquets, Caradeux expressed his sympathy and concern for the “deplorable state” of the West Province, and assured them that preventing a civil war between whites and free people of color was his primary concern.

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<sup>351</sup> *Gazette de Saint-Domingue* no. 81 (Samedi 8 Octobre 1791), 939-940.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*

“This sentiment,” he told them, “has inspired me to write to the *citoyens de couleur* of Croix-des-Bouquets the letter of which I have given you a copy. You will see there all of the efforts that I have made to try to spare, by a solid truce and a well understood agreement, this dependence from the horrors of which it sees itself menaced.”<sup>354</sup> In an effort to frame the breakdown of the concordat, Caradeux made it seem as if he had done everything possible to preserve peace and the continued disturbances were due to the refusal of the citizens of color to reconcile with whites.

Caradeux’s letter to the “citoyens de couleur” of Croix-des-Bouquets stressed the importance of unity and the need to “put an end to our divisions.” “If the country is truly dear to us,” he asked, “can we deliver it to such horrors? So let’s come together, and cease to be enemies.”<sup>355</sup> Both of Caradeux’s letters made it seem as if the whites of Port-au-Prince were completely committed to reconciliation and peace, which implied that the obstacles in the way were being placed by free people of color. Caradeux’s characterization of events, though, completely distorted the reality of the situation, as he was one of the most influential agitators against the peace agreements.<sup>356</sup> In response to Caradeux’s letters, the leaders of the armed free men of color camped at Croix-des-Bouquets, Bauvais and Pinchinat, drafted their own letter published in the *Gazette de Saint-Domingue* on October 19. They too expressed pain over the “horrors of civil war” to which the West Province was exposed, while suggesting that the fault for continued divisions belonged to their opponents. “But, Monsieur, which of us has lit the torch of discord?” Bauvais and Pinchinat inquired, “Examine, judge, and pronounce.”<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> *Gazette de Saint-Domingue*, no. 84 (Mercredi 19 Octobre 1791), 965.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid*, 966.

<sup>356</sup> Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 122-23.

<sup>357</sup> *Gazette de Saint-Domingue*, no. 84 (Mercredi 19 Octobre 1791), 966-67.

Despite the assurances given by both sides that they were devoted to achieving peace and reconciliation, the original September 11 concordat failed and both sides ultimately refused to disarm. The citizens of color camped at Croix-des-Bouquets complained of repeated violations of the original concordats, including attacks on bands of free men of color attempting to secure provisions from Port-au-Prince as agreed upon in the concordats. Through a series of victories over the white National Guard of Port-au-Prince during the month of October, Pinchinat and Bauvais forced the whites back to the negotiating table.<sup>358</sup> The subsequent October 29 concordat looked very much like the September 11 concordat in terms of the demands made by the free men of color. The most important demands made by the representatives for the men of color called for the nullification of the current municipal and provincial assemblies and the election of new assemblies with the full participation of all free men of color regardless of the status of their parents.<sup>359</sup>

In addition to formal recognition of their rights, the leaders of the free men of color were concerned about the language used to refer to people of color in public discourse. Article 14 of the October 29 concordat stated that “the qualifications such as, *le nommé, Nègre libre, Mulâtre libre, Quarteron libre, citoyens de couleur*, and others of this genre, will be severely prohibited in the future; and one will use from now on for all the citizens of the colony only the qualifications used for the whites.”<sup>360</sup> The demand made in article 14 shows that the leaders of the free men of color recognized the importance of language and the power that racial markers held as management devices.

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<sup>358</sup> Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 122-23.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> *Gazette de Saint-Domingue*, no. 87 (Samedi 29 Octobre 1791), 994.

Free colored leaders such as Pinchinat sensed that a redistribution of political power in the colony would also entail changes to the way that formerly excluded groups and individuals were referred to publicly. Eliminating the racist language that had supported white supremacy and replacing it with a color-blind language were seen as vital steps in securing social and political equality for free people of color. Free colored political leaders realized that true social and political integration would only come when racist distinctions no longer found public expression—a point when one could not tell if an article or story involved white or free colored actors based on the language and qualifications given to individuals or groups in the description.

Following the formal negotiation of the concordats, a public ceremony was held to honor the occasion and provide a public reading of the terms of the agreement. The *Gazette de Saint-Domingue* printed the speech delivered by the mayor of Port-au-Prince at the ceremony. Full of ebullient language, he announced, “it is a beautiful day where we can say with truth that we are all brothers and friends!”<sup>361</sup> “It is a beautiful day where two classes of citizens divided until now are mingling and merging for making in the future only one!”, he continued.<sup>362</sup> The mayor’s speech and the ceremony to honor the new concordat represent the public staging or acting out of the new definition of the situation in which the use of racist language in the public arena became illegitimate. “Citizens of color, my friends, you lose here this denomination; there no longer exists any distinction, any difference,” assured the mayor, “We will not have in the future, all of us, than the same qualification, that of citizen.”<sup>363</sup> The armed movement of free men of

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid, 998.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

color in the West succeeded in forcing the political leaders of Port-au-Prince's white population to publicly embrace the disavowal of race. Given that whites in Saint-Domingue had long argued for the necessity of the colony's racialist system and, in particular, an intermediary class between slaves and whites in order to maintain discipline in a slave society, the public embrace of eliminating the color distinctions on which the racialist system hinged marks a tremendous shift in their political position.

It is interesting to compare the color-blind language enforced by free men of color in the West Province to the language used by the men of color in Cayemittes about one month prior. A comparison reveals how the political and social context influenced the public language used to discuss the issues raised by the May 15 law. As noted earlier, at the end of September 1791, leaders of the free colored community in Cayemittes made a public statement of how they viewed the identity of free men of color that essentially accepted the legitimacy of the colonial racialist system's emphasis on blood or descent to categorize colonial population groups. Rather than asserting that distinctions based on descent were illegitimate as free men of color in the West Province had, they put the focus on their European ancestry to make common cause with whites. The fact that one free colored community accepted the basic legitimacy of the colonial racialist system while another rejected it entirely, disavowing the legitimacy of any attempt to categorize groups or individuals based on color, reflects the different political context those two communities found themselves in during September and October 1791. At that point in time, Cayemittes had managed to avoid any open warfare between whites and free people of color. So rather than employ language that challenged the entire foundation of Saint-Domingue's racial hierarchy, the free men of color of Cayemittes asserted their equality

with whites without challenging the social basis of the slave regime. In the West Province, however, free men of color were winning their war with whites in Port-au-Prince who refused to recognize the May 15 law, and as a result, they were in a position to force the adoption a more radical color-blind language of race in public discourse.

The spirit of reconciliation put on display in Port-au-Prince following the concordat would prove short-lived as the political situation changed dramatically following the arrival of news of the National Assembly's September 24 law revoking the May 15 law granting equality to free men of color born to free parents. With the arrival of the September 24 law, a spirit of intransigence set in among white political leaders who now refused any concessions to free men of color and reverted back to a paternalistic language of race. With the French government no longer recognizing the political rights of free men of color and again placing the issue in the hands of colonial governments, white political leaders in Saint-Domingue felt empowered to adopt a language in public discourse that reinforced the colonial racist system premised on white supremacy.

In early November 1791, news of the September 24 law arrived, which caused an immediate stir in Cap Français. Free men of color recognized right away that the law was a serious blow to their political position, and so they attempted to get out in front of the issue by sending two delegates, Castaing and La Forest, to address the Colonial Assembly directly about the new situation. Recognizing that their position no longer had the sanction of the French national government, Castaing and La Forest approached the Colonial Assembly with a cautious tone. Defending the conduct of the free men of color in the North Province since the start of the slave uprising, they described their group as

unwilling to conceive of “brandishing flaming torches against heads of their fathers, their brothers, and in the place where they had been born!”<sup>364</sup> “Eager to fix our happiness in the prosperity of our country, in the esteem and the confidence of our fellow citizens,” the delegates assured their white audience, “we are what we have always been: honest and sensible.”<sup>365</sup> By adopting the paternalistic language of race that positioned whites as the “fathers” of free men of color, Castaing and La Forest hoped to make their plea appear less threatening to Saint-Domingue’s racial order in the eyes of the all-white Colonial Assembly. The language used by the free colored delegates was most certainly shaped by the shifting political context due to the September 24 law. Castaing and La Forest acknowledged the fact that with the new decree the French government had placed their political status solely in the hands of the Colonial Assembly, but they asked that the assembly rule in their favor, noting that “reason, justice, and nature, always eloquent, unite in our favor to claim [a political existence] from you.”<sup>366</sup> While free men of color in the West Province used their dominant military position to gain concessions that went beyond the May 15 law and to enforce a color-blind language of race on public discourse, free men of color in the North Province, especially with the arrival of the September 24 law, found themselves in a weaker political position and, therefore, adopted a language of race that was less threatening and more comfortable to the whites who now controlled their political fate.

The Colonial Assembly issued an obstinate response to Castaing and La Forest that reflected a new level of resolve to protect the color line after the September 24 law.

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<sup>364</sup> *Procès-Verbaux de l'Assemblée générale de la partie française de Saint-Domingue*, (November 7, 1791). AN D XXV 112. Quoted from the notes of Professor Jeremy Popkin.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*



While assuring the men of color that “the General Assembly, always beneficent, has never hesitated to anticipate your needs, when it has thought that this step was important to your happiness and could serve public affairs,” it nevertheless expressed an “extreme pain” at the “guilty maneuvers” to which the men of color had been carried.<sup>367</sup> With the civil war in the West Province in mind, the assembly warned: “It is not on sedition and violence that you should base your hopes. Treaties extracted by force or perfidy can only have temporary success, and the payback must be terrible.”<sup>368</sup> The language used in the Colonial Assembly’s address is embedded with the paternalistic attitudes that supported the racialist system, and it shows how the leverage given to the assembly by the September 24 law led to a harsh tone toward free men of color and a rigid stance on the color line.

The Colonial Assembly acted right away on the initiative granted to it over the status of persons by issuing the November 5 decree days following the address made by Castaing and La Forest. The assembly ordered that “it will not occupy itself with the political state of the *hommes de couleur et nègres libres*, until the cessation of the troubles occasioned by the slave revolt, and until after the said *hommes de couleur et nègres libres*, have returned to their respective parishes, under the authority of the Colonial Assembly, or reunited in their different camps, under the authority of the representative of the king, have cooperated with the *citoyens blancs* to restore order and peace to the colony.”<sup>369</sup> By insisting that it would not legislate on the status of persons until after the slave uprising had been suppressed, the assembly essentially held free

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

<sup>369</sup> *Procès-Verbaux de l'Assemblée générale* (November 5, 1791).

people of color hostage with the November 5 decree by forcing them to fight the revolting slaves without any guarantee that white leaders would reward them for their loyalty. In terms of the racialist language used in the decree, the Colonial Assembly dropped the usage of “citoyens de couleur” that had become more common since the start of the revolution and reverted to “hommes de couleur et nègres libres.”

After fighting against prejudice and the color line for so long, it would have been difficult for many free men of color to accept the reversal of the May 15 law. For many of these individuals, the memory of the brutal torture and execution of Vincent Ogé in February 1791 would undoubtedly still be fresh. The situation was not helped by the attempt by some whites to convince the armed units of free men of color that the Colonial Assembly intended to “disarm them and then massacre them.”<sup>370</sup> With tensions on the rise, the Colonial Assembly and Governor Blanchelande took steps to ease the concerns of Le Cap’s free men of color. Upon learning of the attempts to incite fear among free men of color, the assembly sent a delegation to the free colored military barracks to reassure them that they had the protection of the Colonial Assembly. After hearing from the delegation, commissioners for the free men of color returned to the assembly and “perfectly reassured about the object of their fears, asserted that their fidelity would be unalterable.”<sup>371</sup>

Governor Blanchelande issued a proclamation to extend the message delivered to the free men of color in Le Cap to groups throughout the colony. A newspaper just entering the arena of public discourse, the *Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*,

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<sup>370</sup> *Procès-Verbaux de l’Assemblée générale* (November 11, 1791).

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*

published the proclamation in only its second issue on November 16. The *Moniteur* printed a daily issue in Cap Français, and its coverage of Blanchelande's proclamation contributed to the positioning of free people of color as a potentially volatile and dangerous group in public discourse. Blanchelande began by emphasizing that the Colonial Assembly had taken "under its special protection all of the *hommes de couleur et nègres libres*." The governor positioned "hommes de couleur et nègres libres" as a group that was in the wrong and needed to see the error of its ways. He, nevertheless, expressed his belief that "[*les hommes de couleur et nègres libres*] will finally recognize the voice of reason and justice, and opening their eyes to the awful abyss that their separation from the whites risks plunging the entire colony, they will return to their duties and join themselves to the whites, their fathers and benefactors, in order to combat the revolting slaves."<sup>372</sup> Blanchelande's proclamation is part of a larger shift in public discourse where free men of color were now being represented as a group guilty of errors in judgment and excesses, while whites were positioned as magnanimous parental figures offering a corrective and guiding hand to free men of color. This discursive shift represents the reversion back to the paternalistic racist language of the colonial regime due to the loss of political leverage by free people of color. The recalcitrance embodied in the paternalistic language invoked by white authorities during this period belied the fundamental cracks in the edifice of the colonial system produced by the slave revolt.

The *Moniteur* further amplified this representation of the political situation between whites and people of color in the North Province in the days following its publication of Governor Blanchelande's proclamation. On November 18, it published

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<sup>372</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (November 16, 1791), 7.

reports sent from white troops at the commune of Terrier Rouge in the North Province concerning their efforts to combat the slave revolt. They reported encountering groups of “hommes de couleur” among the “brigands” who confessed to being in error and promised to join the whites in fighting the slave insurrection.<sup>373</sup> Also, on November 20, the *Moniteur* published a letter from Terrier Rouge informing the Colonial Assembly of the “reunion of the *gens de couleur* of this parish to the common cause.”<sup>374</sup> These reports not only positioned free men of color as a group that had been led astray and carried to excesses, but they also represented the Colonial Assembly’s November 5 decree as successful in correcting their behavior.

In the West Province, free men of color who had been engaged in bitter fighting with whites dominating the municipal and provincial government were not prepared to give up their gains even though France had withdrawn the May 15 law. Although the September 24 law and the Colonial Assembly’s subsequent November 5 decree certainly complicated the position of free men of color in the West Province, their *grand blanc* allies still recognized the value of making peace with the free colored population in order to preserve slavery. The *petits blancs* of Port-au-Prince who were empowered for the first time by the institution of representative assemblies and the extension of voting rights to all white citizens, on the other hand, were looking for any opportunity to undermine the peace agreements with free men of color, and, certainly, the September 24 law gave people like Paul Cadusch and Praloto, the leader of a group of *petits blancs* bitterly

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<sup>373</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (November 18, 1791), 16.

<sup>374</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (November 20, 1791), 21.

opposed to the concordats, an avenue to get out of the agreements they had made with Pinchinat and Bauvais.

The relationship between whites and people of color in Port-au-Prince remained uneasy throughout the month of November, but tensions came to a boiling point on November 21, the day the concordats were set to be ratified in Port-au-Prince. After the municipality voted to ratify the concordat, a fight broke out in the streets of Port-au-Prince between a free black member of Pinchinat's army named Scapin and a white agitator connected to Praloto's group. Scapin was arrested and summarily executed, the punishment accorded to slaves guilty of striking a white person under the segregationist legal code developed in Saint-Domingue but in violation of the due process accorded to free people of color under the recently ratified concordat. A standoff ensued between white troops and free men of color, who armed themselves and holed up in their barracks, but that night, the men of color were forced to retreat to their base at Croix-des-Bouquets. The next morning, on November 22, fires broke out simultaneously in several parts of the city. The devastating fires would ultimately consume nearly two-thirds of the city. With Port-au-Prince in flames, the city descended into a horrifying scene of racial violence. Amidst accusations that free people of color were responsible for setting the fires, the most violent and bloodthirsty of the white faction drove out or killed any free people of color left behind, even firing on women and children.<sup>375</sup>

With the complete collapse of the concordats and the September 24 law's removal of metropolitan protection for free people of color against their enemies, the situation in the West Province became one of all-out war that also spread to the South. With

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<sup>375</sup> Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 125-26.

Pinchinat and Bauvais operating out of Croix-des-Bouquets, Rigaud's forces moved through the South Province to capture the city of Léogane to give free men of color control over the region surrounding Port-au-Prince, while the city itself remained a stronghold for the white factions. In the South, whites and free men of color began forming small armies, and both groups recruited slaves to fight for them—a maneuver that threatened to destabilize the slave regime throughout the entire province.<sup>376</sup>

With the slave uprising ongoing in the North and Port-au-Prince burning in the West, the First Civil Commission, dispatched to convince the colonists to get onboard with French laws on the colony, arrived to unexpected conditions. Reflecting their faith in the power of language, the French revolutionaries expected the First Civil Commission to complete its mission through persuasion with words alone. At the time of its departure, the May 15 law was France's official policy on the political rights of free men of color and news of the slave uprising had not yet reached France. The commissioners—Frédéric Mirbeck, Philippe Roume, and Edmond de Saint-Léger—were forced to adapt to the new conditions while also trying to decipher the local political landscape. Right away, groups anxious to direct the course of events in Saint-Domingue began lobbying the new commissioners. As the embodiment of the authority of the French national government, rival political groups sought to legitimate their positions by winning over the commissioners. In this environment, the issues raised by free people of color became a political football. The Colonial Assembly wanted to maintain sole authority over the political fate of Saint-Domingue's free men of color without crossing the Civil Commission and appearing to unpatriotically challenge French sovereignty.

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<sup>376</sup>Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 122-29.

Initially, though, since the official policy of the government they represented was the September 24 law, the confidence of whites ran high that the commissioners would be able to help bring an end to both the slave uprising and the movement of free men of color in the West and South.

Once the Civil Commission disembarked at Cap Français, local residents wasted no time making a public demonstration of their enthusiasm for its mission. Local white authorities organized a procession through the city culminating at the meeting house of the Colonial Assembly. The procession followed a traditional format with the clergy at the head, followed by the Société royale des sciences and the Chambre d'Agriculture, then prominent merchants, military officers, legal officials and lawyers, and, finally, the Provincial and Colonial Assemblies.<sup>377</sup> Notably, representatives for the free population of color were not included. The *Moniteur Générale* reported that upon their arrival at the assembly, the commissioners were greeted by “new applause, new cries of joy, the crowd constantly growing.”<sup>378</sup> Each of the commissioners delivered a speech “full of energy, goodwill, and patriotism.”<sup>379</sup> The minutes of the Colonial Assembly commented about the speeches that “what was noteworthy was the extreme sensitivity that they demonstrated when they spoke of the misfortunes which have overcome us from all sides for nearly four months.”<sup>380</sup> Their speeches apparently gave whites confidence that the Civil Commission would take a hard line toward both the slave uprising and the revolt of free men of color in the South and West, as the *Moniteur's* report boasted “tremble cruel

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<sup>377</sup> *Procès-Verbaux de l'Assemblée générale* (December 3, 1791)

<sup>378</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue* Vol. 1, No. 15 (November 29, 1791), 59.

<sup>379</sup> *Procès-Verbaux de l'Assemblée générale* (December 3, 1791)

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*

forces of the horrors of which we have been victim for a long time.” Reflecting a triumphant and paternalistic attitude, an editorial comment in the same article commanded: “You, *hommes de couleur et nègres libres*, love your fathers and your benefactors; and you slaves, respect and cherish your masters ....”<sup>381</sup> Thus, during a time of their political marginalization, colonial public discourse placed free people of color in the same category as slaves as groups who owed tribute to whites.

However, the Civil Commission’s initial published address to the “colons, habitants, citoyens blancs, hommes de couleur et nègres libres” of Saint-Domingue struck a more moderate tone. Rather than casting blame on either whites or people of color, the commissioners stated: “We invite all of you to peace, and we exhort you to forget your reciprocal wrongs and injuries.”<sup>382</sup> The commissioners also showed moderation with their willingness to end the slave uprising with an offer of amnesty rather than through forcing an unconditional surrender. The Colonial Assembly was bitterly opposed to entertaining any overtures from the rebel slaves, and this would become first issue to cause a split between local white officials and the Civil Commission. Whites had refused to accept anything but unconditional defeat of the slave rebellion since it began, arguing that negotiation would only encourage future uprisings. Although the leaders of the insurrection, Jean François and Biassou, sent emissaries throughout December 1791 to approach white leaders about a possible settlement, the Civil Commission was unable to get the Colonial Assembly to budge on the issue.

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<sup>381</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue* Vol. 1, No. 15 (November 29, 1791), 59-60.

<sup>382</sup> *Procès-Verbaux de l’Assemblée générale* (December 6, 1791)



During this same period, free men of color as a group were being marginalized politically as the Colonial Assembly held firm to its November 5 decree and officially annulled the concordats signed in the West, and, hand in hand with their political marginalization, they were positioned in public discourse as a potentially dangerous and disruptive element. During the first week of December, a member of the Colonial Assembly, M. de Leaumont, proposed that the Civil Commission be “instructed of the situation in which the provinces of the West and South find themselves, particularly the city of Port-au-Prince, and engaging them to use from this moment all the influence of their character, for stopping the disorders and the crimes to which this unfortunate colony is delivered.”<sup>383</sup> While Leaumont’s proposal avoided any direct reference to any particular racial group, it nevertheless represented the events that sprang from the free colored challenge to white authority in the West as criminal, reflecting the perspective of the white faction dominating Port-au-Prince.

Toward the end of the month, the *Moniteur* ran a steady stream of reports received from the West and South that added to the perception that free men of color were causing trouble throughout the colony by challenging the legally vested authority of whites. On December 18, the *Moniteur* printed a report from the West on the events that transpired in Port-au-Prince on November 21 and 22. The report provided readers with a decisively white perspective on events, describing how a group of *hommes de couleur* seized the weapons of a group of “habitans blancs” from Croix-des-Bouquets and imprisoned them. It commented sarcastically that after hearing news of the decrees from the National Assembly and the arrival of the civil commissioners that the free people of

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<sup>383</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue* Vol. 1, No. 24 (December 8, 1791), 95.

color offered proof of their goodwill toward the nation and toward peace by attacking the city of Port-au-Prince and “cutting the throats” of all the whites in their path.<sup>384</sup> The *Moniteur* also printed several letters from the West and South that described violent acts committed by free men of color since the burning of Port-au-Prince, without including any voices from free men of color to provide their perspective on events. Hand-in-hand with their political marginalization, free colored voices were also being squeezed out of public discourse and prevented from defending their actions. In a sense, the *Moniteur* functioned during this period as a mouthpiece for whites to frame the chaotic political situation in Saint-Domingue, and, for the most part, when free men of color were mentioned in public discourse during the period following the arrival of the Civil Commission and the annulment of the concordat, they were represented as a criminal, violent, and disruptive group.

As the Civil Commission was getting its feet wet in Saint-Domingue, a new series of debates on the colonies began in France. This new round of debate was driven by Brissot and his attempt to reconcile news of the August 23 slave uprising with his vision of Saint-Domingue politics. Reports of the slave uprising first began to arrive in France in late October. On October 24, the *Gazette universelle*, a Parisian newspaper sympathetic to the colonial lobby, printed the first report “that in the plain du Cap the *nègres* were in open revolt, that they had already burned many plantations ....”<sup>385</sup> Given that the only word of the uprising came from informal channels without any official

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<sup>384</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue* Vol. 1, No. 34 (December 18, 1791), 138-39.

<sup>385</sup> *Gazette universelle* (October 24, 1791), 1186.

confirmation from the colonial governor, there were considerable doubts about the validity of the reports.<sup>386</sup>

However, on November 3, a special envoy dispatched by the Colonial Assembly officially informed the French government of the disaster that had befallen Saint-Domingue. The speech delivered by the emissaries of the Colonial Assembly described in gruesome detail the brutality attributed to the revolting slaves. The scenes described recycled several tropes common to white fears of racial vengeance, such as the slaughter of white children and the rape of white women. For instance, the report asserted that the standard carried by the revolting slaves “was the body of a white child impaled upon a stake.” It also emphasized the theme of the kind slave master betrayed and slain by his most trusted slave, claiming that “a colonist is murdered by the very negro whom he had most distinguished by acts of kindness. His wife, stretched upon his body, is forced to satisfy the brutality of the murderer.”<sup>387</sup>

In their November 3 speech, the deputies also sought to control the political meaning of the slave uprising. The humanitarian reforms to slavery and gradual abolition programs endorsed by the *Amis des Noirs* was one of their main targets. Asserting that the slaves who “had been most kindly treated by their masters were the soul of the insurrection,” the deputies stated rhetorically, “What a lesson for the *Amis des Noirs*!”<sup>388</sup> From their perspective, the slave uprising confirmed what the colonial lobby had argued since the beginning of the Revolution. “Calamities” that they had “predicted since the

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<sup>386</sup> *Gazette universelle* (October 25, 1791). 1190.

<sup>387</sup> *A Particular Account of the Commencement and Progress of the Insurrection of the Negroes in St. Domingo, which began in August last. Being a Translation of the Speech Made to the National Assembly, the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 1791, by the Deputies from the General Assembly of the French Part of St. Domingo* (n.p.,n.d.), 7, 8.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid*, 10-11.

earliest proceedings of the Amis des Noirs [have] now recently been realized.” The deputies made the Amis des Noirs directly responsible for the slave uprising, suggesting that pamphlets from the Amis des Noirs invoking the Declaration of Rights and declaring the freedom of the slaves were read “in the midst of our [slave] gangs.”<sup>389</sup> They also connected the measures taken in favor of free men of color by the National Assembly to the origins of the uprising. According to the earliest depositions of captured insurgents, their report asserted, the decree of May 15 and speeches made in its favor “were read and commented upon, by a Mulatto upon Normand’s plantation, in the nocturnal assemblies where the Negro drivers met, who are now the ringleaders of the rebels.”<sup>390</sup>

With its accusations against Brissot’s group and the Amis des Noirs, the report delivered on November 3 initiated a battle to control the political implications of the uprising. The colonial lobby capitalized on the news of the uprising to argue that white colonists had been right all along about the dangers of tampering with the color line. Through his position on the Colonial Committee, Barnave had managed to shape France’s policy on the colonies according to the desires of the colonial lobby until Brissot’s group gained an unexpected victory with the May 15 law. News of the slave uprising threatened to discredit Brissot’s perspective and confirm the wisdom of maintaining Barnave’s September 24 law.

An anonymous pamphlet published in the name of the “vrai législateur” took advantage of the news of the uprising to support the position of colonial whites. It praised the wisdom of the National Assembly’s March 8 and October 12, 1790 decrees

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<sup>389</sup> Ibid, 21, 22.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid, 28.

and reaffirmed the principles guiding those laws. The constitutional basis of the colonies had excluded free men of color from political rights, but, asserted the “vrai législateur,” “the Constituent Assembly recognized that it was not a vain prejudice that had excluded them from it, but that it was the principle of both the existence of the colonies and the interests of France.”<sup>391</sup> Repeating some of the same accusations as the colonial deputies’ November 3 address, the “vrai législateur” explicitly blamed the May 15 law for the slave uprising, arguing that its arrival in Saint-Domingue initiated “the maneuvers that excited the revolt of the *nègres* and all of the excesses of which one cannot hear the story of without horror.”<sup>392</sup>

With accusations coming from the colonial lobby that Brissot’s policy was to blame for the disasters unfolding in Saint-Domingue, his supporters rallied a public opinion campaign of their own to put their spin on the meaning of the uprising. At first, Brissot’s group downplayed the seriousness of the revolt, suggesting that reports of a general uprising were exaggerated. Claude Milscent, a white colonist from Saint-Domingue recently arrived in Paris who had become involved in Jacobin political circles, compared the uprising to historic examples of resistance employed by slaves, primarily marronage. In the reports coming from Saint-Domingue, asserted Milscent, “I do not see anything which announces a general conspiracy, but only the result of a project, many times formed by some determined *nègres* for more than 80 years, to shake off the yoke of slavery and isolate themselves in the woods.”<sup>393</sup> In addition to downplaying the scope of the insurrection, Milscent countered the assertion that the May 15 law was to blame for

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<sup>391</sup> *Le Mot du vrai législateur, sur la révolte et les incendies arrivés à Saint-Domingue, au mois d’Août 1791* (n.p., n.d.), 4-5.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>393</sup> Claude Milscent, *Sur les troubles de Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1791), 4.

the situation. Whites, he suggested, had let the revolt happen in an effort to make it appear that the May 15 law “surrounded them in danger.”<sup>394</sup> In time Milscent would become one of the most enthusiastic and vocal supporters of racial equality in Saint-Domingue, and, here, he flipped the argument about the lessons of the slave uprising advanced by white colonists, suggesting instead that a law in favor of free people of color was the only way to prevent the destruction of the colony.

On December 1, Brissot delivered a speech to the Assembly that expounded at length on his vision of the problems in Saint-Domingue. Brissot’s main goal was to demonstrate that the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue was the direct result of a conspiracy on the part of whites to deliver the colony over to a foreign power. “The revolt of the blacks,” Brissot claimed, “has been only a means, an instrument in the hand of the whites who would like, in freeing themselves from French dependence, to free themselves from the laws which have humiliated their vanity and from the debts that hinder their taste for squandering.”<sup>395</sup> Brissot’s accusations gave fuel to the paranoia over counter-revolutionary plots, while also helping build his case for foreign wars to protect the revolution from enemies abroad. Shifting the blame for the insurrection to whites hostile to the May 15 law also helped him distance his policies from responsibility for the disaster. Brissot’s analysis of the situation is revealing of how language and discourse operated in the political culture of the French Revolution to shape government policy and subsequent change or action in society. By framing the situation in the context of a

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>395</sup> Brissot, *Discours de J.P. Brissot, Député, sur les causes des troubles de Saint-Domingue, prononcé à la séance du premier Décembre 1791* (n.p., n.d.), 4.

counter-revolutionary plot, Brissot created a discursive situation whereby support for the opposing side was a sign of undermining the revolution.

In terms of his analysis of the trouble in Saint-Domingue, Brissot made it seem that supporting free people of color was the only patriotic choice by defining the groups in colonial society in a way that supported his vision of a counter-revolutionary plot operating in the colony. According to Brissot, the white population of Saint-Domingue could be broken down into two main groups: “*colons blancs* with large properties” and “*petits blancs* without property and living off of industry.” Within the group of *colons blancs*, there were some that Brissot defined as virtuous because they kept their affairs in order and others that he described as unscrupulous debtors looking for a way out. The former group, according to Brissot, “love France, are attached and submitted to its laws, because they sense the need that they have for its protection in order to conserve their property and order.” This group of virtuous *colons blancs* also “love and support the *hommes de couleur*, because they regard them as the true bulwarks of the colony, as the men the most suited to stopping the revolt of the *noirs*.” The latter group of colonists mired in debt, though, “love neither French law nor the *hommes de couleur*” because a well-ordered state would force them to pay their debts. In Brissot’s view, these men hated free people of color because they realized that “the *hommes de couleur*, nearly all free from debt and regular in their affairs, are always inclined to defend the law, and that their courage, their number, and their zeal only could ... guarantee the execution of your laws.”<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

Brissot was careful to give an explicit definition of free people of color that distanced their cause from the one undertaken by the revolting slaves. In categorizing free men of color, Brissot reminded his audience: “These are not, messieurs, (and it is important to repeat it often to eliminate the perfidious insinuations of the *colons*) these are not black slaves: these are men who owe directly or indirectly their life to European blood mixed with African blood.” The conduct of whites toward men of color was especially egregious because “it is their own blood that they debase; it is the forehead of his own child that he marks with a signet of shame ...”<sup>397</sup> Brissot concluded that “you must regard the enemies of the *hommes de couleur* as the most violent enemies of our constitution ... The cause of the *hommes de couleur* is therefore the cause of the patriots, of the old third estate, of the people oppressed for so long.”<sup>398</sup>

Demonstrating the difficulty in escaping the use of racialized language even when trying to tear down the system it supports, Brissot provided his own racialized vision of colonial society to counter the one forwarded by colonial whites in France. In summary of how each racial group as he defined it saw the Revolution, Brissot wrote: “The honest *colons* and good plantation owners ... have loved the revolution. ... The *hommes de couleur* have found [in the revolution] the hope of extinguishing the prejudice that kept them in disgrace, of resurrecting their rights and they have loved the revolution.” Indebted colonists and “petits blancs,” however, sought to undermine the revolution and extend their own “personal despotism.”<sup>399</sup> In the atmosphere of revolutionary political culture, especially the obsession with counter-revolutionary conspiracy, framing the

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<sup>397</sup> Ibid, 7-8.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid, 6-7.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid, 9.



situation in those terms made support for free people of color seem like the obvious patriotic choice. Ironically, in advocating the extension of political rights to free men of color in Saint-Domingue, Brissot had to invoke the very racist language used to create and support an exclusionary system of power relations based on categorizations according to those terms.

Brissot's December 1 speech initiated a week-long series of debates on how France should act next to restore order in Saint-Domingue. France had recently learned of the concordats passed between whites and free people of color in the West Province of Saint-Domingue, and, although those agreements had already dissolved in Saint-Domingue, the National Assembly, unaware of the present state of the concordats, considered a motion to ratify them, highlighting among other things the impossibility for decision makers in France to keep pace with events in the colonies. The emissaries sent to France by the Colonial Assembly responded immediately to these developments. Just as they had been given hope as to "the vivid impression that appeared to have been made on you by the tableau of our misfortunes," lamented the deputies, "the record of your session from yesterday has cast consternation in our souls."<sup>400</sup> Their main concern was that by putting the motion to ratify the concordats on the table the assembly had departed "from the tenor of the September 24 law."<sup>401</sup> These representatives of the all-white Colonial Assembly insisted that they were not motivated by any "repugnance to dispositions favorable to the *hommes de couleur*." Rather it was a matter of maintaining a constitutional principle that just so happened to give white colonists "the right to rule

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<sup>400</sup> *Pétition faite à l'Assemblée Nationale, par MM. les Commissaires de l'Assemblée générale de la partie française de St.-Domingue, le 2 Décembre 1791, et lue le 3* (n.p., n.d.), 3.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid*, 3-4.

on the status of persons.” “This right,” they implored as had the colonial lobby since the start of the Revolution, “is the only guarantee of our existence, and we cannot give it up.”<sup>402</sup> Perhaps reflecting their incredulity over facing so much hostility from the French assembly in the face of the slave uprising, they asked if “the fatal predictions of our defenders, of our compatriots, have not been realized enough that one must finally give them their faith?”<sup>403</sup>

Despite the expectation of the Colonial Assembly’s delegation that the French Legislative Assembly would simply put its faith in their assessment of the situation, the assembly remained sharply divided over the proper course of action to pursue in Saint-Domingue. In fact, far from reaching agreement on what to do about the situation in Saint-Domingue, French legislators could not even agree on the causes of the trouble there. Brissot’s radical Jacobin faction used the slave uprising in Saint-Domingue to whip up support for preemptive foreign wars to protect the revolutionary movement by arguing that white counter-revolutionaries hostile to political equality were to blame. The leaders of the Feuillant faction, associated with the pro-colonial lobby, argued that it was France’s tampering with the colonial racialist system in the name of revolutionary idealism that was to blame. In truth, suggested a deputy representing the Rhone-et-Loire, neither side was totally correct. In seeking to explain the slave uprising, one side accused the colonists “who in turn charged the *Amis des noirs* with having provoked the insurrection.”<sup>404</sup> “Oh well,” he concluded, “what is most likely is that neither the one nor

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<sup>402</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>404</sup> *Opinion de M. J. F. Michon, Député du Département de Rhône-et-Loire. Sur le projet de décret de M. Brissot, concernant les troubles des Colonies* (n.p., n.d.), 3.

the other merit such imputation.”<sup>405</sup> In his view, both sides ignored the agency of the slaves in sparking their own revolution by suggesting that the impetus for it had to have come from whites or free people of color.

While it was clear that an appropriate response would include sending reinforcements to restore order in Saint-Domingue, the question became about what type of order the troops would be instructed to restore. Given his interpretation of the problems in Saint-Domingue as arising from whites hostile to the revolution, Brissot proposed that troops be used to submit the colony to revolutionary principles. Recently informed of the concordats and unaware that they had already collapsed by December, Brissot’s proposal stipulated that the troops would have to maintain the political state of free people of color as of September when the first concordat was signed. This measure would have effectively circumvented the September 24 law championed by Barnave’s Feuillant group. Supporters of Brissot’s proposal favored upholding the concordats reached in Saint-Domingue as a way to stand behind the revolutionary principle of equality while also letting the colonists work out their own issues. The concordat, argued a deputy in the Legislative Assembly, had the advantage of “suffocating the seeds of hate and discord between *Colons* divided by pride, but united by the same interests, of a different color, but often of the same blood.”<sup>406</sup> Garran-Coulon, a deputy from Paris, endorsed Brissot’s representation of the situation, arguing that revolutionary principles needed to be put in place in Saint-Domingue to prevent the colony from becoming a bastion for the counter-revolution and a platform for the regrowth of the aristocracy in

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<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid, 5.

France.<sup>407</sup> Garran-Coulon's proof of the counter-revolutionary sympathies of the deputies from the colonies was that they had "qualified themselves as *subjects* [italics in original] in the address that they presented to the king."<sup>408</sup> In the increasingly tense atmosphere of revolutionary political culture, parsing out language became the key to uncovering the secret motivations of political figures.

The main argument against Brissot concerned the constitutionality of his proposal. The September 24 law was still on the books, and many legislators could not endorse a measure that would contradict it. A deputy named Ducastel commented: "Like M. Brissot, I cherish liberty, I detest slavery: I proclaim the natural and civil rights of *hommes de couleur*. I wish that all the *colons blancs* had recognized [their rights]; but I respect the constitution and the existing laws religiously."<sup>409</sup> Other objections to Brissot concerned the practicality of ordering French troops to uphold the concordats with so much uncertainty surrounding the current state of the colony. Ducastel pointed out that Brissot's proposal "supposes that positions have not changed from the month of September to the present."<sup>410</sup> Indeed, conditions in Saint-Domingue had changed, and as the Legislative Assembly considered Brissot's measure during the first week of December, the West Province where the concordats were negotiated was recovering from an orgy of racial violence that resulted in the burning of Port-au-Prince.

On December 10, the Colonial Committee issued its official report on the events that had led to the slave uprising in Saint-Domingue. Endorsing the colonial lobby's

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<sup>407</sup> *Opinion sur les mesures provisoires relatives aux Colonies; Prononcée à la séance du 7 Décembre 1791, par J. P. H. Garran, Député de Paris* (Paris, 1791), 8.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>409</sup> *Opinion de M. Ducastel, Député du Département de la Seine-Inférieure, dans l'affaire des colonies, prononcée à la séance du 7 Décembre 1791* (Paris, 1791), 8-9.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

perspective, the report reflects the control that the moderate Feuillant group had over the Legislative Assembly's internal apparatus. The tone of the report was hostile toward free men of color who had taken up arms to secure their rights. It positioned them as instigators and troublemakers while absolving whites from any blame for the hostility between the two groups. While continually emphasizing the fact that free men of color had "exercised violent acts of all kinds . . .,"<sup>411</sup> it made it appear as if the Colonial Assembly had done everything possible to work with free people of color and prevent bloodshed. "While the Colonial Assembly occupied itself, in the North Province, with the means of ameliorating the state of the *hommes de couleur libres*, those in the West Province armed themselves near Port-au-Prince and gathered under their orders a sizeable number of *nègres*."<sup>412</sup> In the Colonial Committee's view, despite the best efforts of the Colonial Assembly, "the revolt continues in Saint-Domingue: individual reports received from that colony announce that the *noirs* in the North Province and the *mulâtres* in the West Province exercise still the most disturbing acts of violence."<sup>413</sup> Similar to the rhetoric about free men of color in colonial public discourse after the arrival of the September 24 law, the Colonial Committee's report framed free people of color as a destabilizing force that used violence to secure its goals.

Overall, the December debates show that the Jacobin supporters of free people of color in Paris were not able to overcome the colonial lobby, which had the support of moderates in part because of how the situation in Saint-Domingue was framed in public

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<sup>411</sup> Charles Tarbé, *Rapport sur les troubles de Saint-Domingue, fait à l'Assemblée nationale, par Charles Tarbé, Député de la Seine Inférieure, au nom du comité colonial, le 10 Décembre 1791*. Première Partie (n.p., n.d.), 20.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

discourse. In the official narrative endorsed by the Colonial Committee, free people of color were positioned as a disruptive element that continually used violence to challenge the legally vested authority in the colony. Even though deputies such as Garran-Coulon defended the use of force by free men of color, stating “the *hommes de couleur* have followed your example”,<sup>414</sup> at this point, only radical Jacobins were in favor of enforcing political equality in Saint-Domingue in the face of the slave revolt and seeming failure of the May 15 law.

The Legislative Assembly remained deeply divided over what to do about Saint-Domingue. Over the next several months, Brissot’s group created a stalemate in the Legislative Assembly, preventing any further financial or military aid for Saint-Domingue without the revocation of the September 24 law. The moderate Feuillant faction continued to support the position of the colonists and used its influence on the Colonial Committee to protect the September 24 law and encourage the Colonial Assembly to take favorable action toward free people of color to turn public opinion in the colonists’ favor. Occasionally, new reports from Saint-Domingue would initiate another round of debate in the assembly. Toward the end of January 1792, the delegates sent by the Colonial Assembly obtained permission to present a report on some letters they had just received from Saint-Domingue that had been sent in November. Hoping to sway the Legislative Assembly in their favor, the delegates were dismayed to find instead that “murmurs and heckles awaited us.”<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>414</sup> *Opinion sur les mesures provisoires relatives aux Colonies; Prononcée à la séance du 7 Décembre 1791, par J. P. H. Garran, Député de Paris* (Paris, 1791), 5.

<sup>415</sup> Archives nationales, D XXV 76, letters from the Colonial Assembly’s delegates to the Legislative Assembly to the Colonial Assembly, January 20, 1792. Notes provided by Professor Jeremy Popkin.

The *colons* and their supporters continued, nevertheless, to lobby for the support of public opinion and the Legislative Assembly. Shortly after the unwelcome reception received by the delegates from Saint-Domingue, Gouy d’Arsy, a leading colonial deputy in the Legislative Assembly, published his *Idées sommaires* on the causes and solutions to the troubles in Saint-Domingue. Reverting to traditional arguments put forth by the *colons*, Gouy maintained that slavery and racial prejudice were both necessary evils in the colonial world. Slavery was necessary, he argued, because whites lacked the physical constitution required to perform manual labor in a tropical environment and blacks lacked the motivation required to work without being “stimulated by slavery.”<sup>416</sup> Although an increasingly untenable position on the subject, Gouy nevertheless insisted that racial prejudice “maintained religiously, respected in all aspects, has become during a century and a half the palladium of the masters . . . .”<sup>417</sup> In terms of free people of color, Gouy represented their group in a way that they and their supporters in France would have likely found quite offensive. He defined free people of color as “a race of individuals of another color, that one calls *mulâtres*, *quarterons*, *metis*, *grifs*, etc., according to their nuance.” Gouy argued that this “race of individuals” owed its freedom and wealth to the “generosity” of white colonists, and in return, whites only asked for “a respectful submission on the part of *mulâtres* toward their benefactors, toward the class of those from whom they take their life and fortune.”<sup>418</sup> Gouy’s racial paternalism was shared among whites in Saint-Domingue who reverted to that discourse following the arrival of the September 24 law in the colony, and it was that very discourse that free men of color

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<sup>416</sup> Gouy d’Arsy, *Idées sommaires sur la restauration de Saint-Domingue, présentées à la nation, au roi et à la colonie* (Paris, 1792), 41, 46.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*

objected to strongly enough to insert a prohibition against it in the concordats negotiated with whites in the West Province. As we will see, that language would prove just as unpopular among revolutionary politicians.

The tide of public opinion had turned against the colonists since the wave of support they received from France's commercial cities after the May 15 law, and French opinion was in no mood to support a position so out of touch with revolutionary ideals and values, especially in an environment where it seemed that external enemies were out to undermine the revolution. Despite putting in use "all that our zeal suggested to us to restore public opinion in our favor," the delegates from the Colonial Assembly were unable to gain much sympathy for their position.<sup>419</sup> They lamented that they were unable to obtain support from commercial centers such as Bordeaux, which were dominated by the Jacobin club. Further evidence that opinion was not in their favor was that the writings of Gatereau, Raimond, and Garran-Coulon, all three supporters of free people of color and hostile to whites in the Colonial Assembly, were distributed "to the members of the National Assembly, not by the post, as we have been obliged to do," but by official publication by the assembly itself.<sup>420</sup> The delegates were aware that they were losing the campaign to shape French public opinion, and on the eve of the debate, set for March 21, 1792, on sending aid to Saint-Domingue and revoking the September 24 law, they were not confident about obtaining the outcome they desired.

After five months of delays and stalling tactics employed by both sides of the colonial question, the Legislative Assembly finally began to decide what to do about the

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<sup>419</sup> Archives nationales, D XXV 76, letters from the Colonial Assembly's delegates to the Legislative Assembly to the Colonial Assembly, February 11, 1792.

<sup>420</sup> Archives nationales, D XXV 76, letters from the Colonial Assembly's delegates to the Legislative Assembly to the Colonial Assembly, March 20, 1792.



situation in Saint-Domingue. In the session of March 22, a Girondin deputy, Gensonné, made a proposal in attempt to break the gridlock. In his view, the assembly was torn between two sides: maintaining the September 24 law or ratifying the concordats. Gensonné aimed to find “a point of rapprochement between the most divided opinions ...”<sup>421</sup> In essence, though, his proposal was not a compromise as he suggested that the Colonial Assemblies be allowed to keep the initiative granted by the September 24 law, but the initiative must be exercised by “the generality of the *colons*, that is to say, not only the *colons blancs*, but also *les hommes de couleur et nègres libres*.”<sup>422</sup> Reflecting his endorsement of Brissot’s perspective on the colonial question, Gensonné suggested that a decree in favor of free people of color “will be applauded by the majority of *colons blancs*, who blush today from having been for so long the dupes of a handful of factious and counter-revolutionaries, who detest their old prejudices and the injustices that it made them commit ...”<sup>423</sup>

Desperate to block any measures in favor of extending racial equality to the colonies, the supporters of the colonial lobby pleaded their case to the assembly in a final attempt to sway its judgment. Dumas, a pro-colonial deputy, cited the expertise of the Colonial Committee, which “having examined the great number of pieces that have been submitted to you and all the previous documents, has developed the causes of the misfortunes in Saint-Domingue in establishing the order of the facts and their authenticity.”<sup>424</sup> The committee’s report, he suggested, revealed that the real conspiracy

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<sup>421</sup> *Opinion sur les colonies, par M. Gensonné, Député du Département de la Gironde, Prononcée à la Séance du 22 Mars 1792* (Paris, 1792), 5.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>424</sup> *Opinion de M. Dumas, Député du Département de Seine-et-Oise, sur les troubles de St.-Domingue, et les secours à y apporter; Prononcée dans la séance du jeudi 22 Mars 1792* (Paris, n.d.), 2.

in the colony was to secure the “expulsion or the destruction of the *citoyens blancs* and the invasion of their property.”<sup>425</sup> Dumas argued that the “conservation of our colonial system” required leaving the September 24 law intact.<sup>426</sup>

Although the colonial lobby continued to argue that only colonial whites could safely alter the color line in Saint-Domingue, their efforts to convince the Legislative Assembly were unsuccessful. On March 24, the assembly moved to a vote on the decree proposed by Gensonné two days prior, and the delegates sent from Saint-Domingue noted that it passed almost unanimously. “Not only the members of the National Assembly,” they wrote to the Colonial Assembly, “but even the galleries, were exalted to the point that there would have been danger for those who had manifested a contrary opinion; also the very small number of members who were not in the opinion of the majority did not take part in the deliberation.”<sup>427</sup> Although the colonial lobbyists had failed to convince the Legislative Assembly to maintain the September 24 law, they did achieve a minor victory by including a provision that prohibited colonial property owners from being named as part of the civil commission being sent to enforce the new law, which thwarted “the project formed by our enemies of sending in this quality [Julien] Raymond, *homme de couleur* . . .”<sup>428</sup> The March 24 decree, signed into law by Louis XVI on April 4, established full civil and political equality for free people of color and ordered that a three person civil commission along with 6,000 troops be sent to Saint-Domingue to put down the slave revolt and enforce the new law.

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<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>427</sup> Archives nationales, D XXV 76, letters from the Colonial Assembly’s delegates to the Legislative Assembly to the Colonial Assembly, March 26, 1792.

<sup>428</sup> Archives nationales, D XXV 76, letters from the Colonial Assembly’s delegates to the Legislative Assembly to the Colonial Assembly, April 1, 1792.

The April 4 law was a momentous victory for free men of color and the culmination of years' worth of effort on the part of individuals such as Julien Raimond, who had fought tirelessly to end the prejudice and discrimination against the members of his group. The victory was also made possible by recent political developments that saw Brissot's Girondin faction gain a dominant position in the assembly and secure the appointment of a Jacobin ministry in exchange for supporting a declaration of war against Austria. While still unwilling to attack the institution of slavery, the revolutionary French government took a major step toward fulfilling its ideals of universal equality with the April 4 law. Previously, the French assembly had placed pragmatic concerns about maintaining order in the colonies ahead of its ideals. Raimond and other men of color in Paris addressed the Legislative Assembly in the wake of the historic decree. "After long and cruel persecutions," they announced, "it is finally permitted to us to hope for happier days."<sup>429</sup> They praised the assembly for "destroying the final and most disastrous of prejudices" and for "regenerating the colonies by this truth: the happiness of all societies depends on the equality of rights, which only can establish prosperity on the eternal basis of justice."<sup>430</sup> The men of color in Paris offered to return to the colonies to convince "our brothers of color to aid the whites with all their means in repairing their losses [and] to contribute finally to the perfect harmony which must reign between all citizens."<sup>431</sup> The president of the Legislative Assembly responded that it had not "exercised toward you an act of beneficence, but it has fulfilled one of its highest duties

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<sup>429</sup> *Discours prononcé, par les hommes de couleur, à la barre de l'assemblée nationale, le 30 Mars 1792* (Paris, n.d.), 1.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid*, 1-2.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

in proclaiming your right to political equality.”<sup>432</sup> As the revolutionary movement increasingly turned toward support for the radical Jacobin wing, the April 4 law was represented as the fulfillment of the Revolution’s promise. The position of the pro-colonial lobby would no longer hold up in the court of public opinion as the political landscape had shifted to the point that any conservative attempt to maintain an arbitrary privilege was seen as totally illegitimate.

Meanwhile, free people of color in Saint-Domingue remained in a state of limbo until the new law on their political status arrived in the colony. Following the arrival of the September 24 law, the Colonial Assembly had issued its November 5 decree stating its resolve to abstain from legislating on the status of free people of color until the slave revolt had been suppressed. This measure was intended to leverage the support of the North Province’s free colored population in fighting the revolting slaves, and it was successful in that regard. The Colonial Assembly retained administrative control of the North Province though the battle against the insurgent slaves settled into a stalemate. With the dissolution of the concordats in November 1791, armed groups of free men of color resumed their battle with their white opponents for control of parts of the West and South Provinces. Free men of color gained control of several vital regions, such as Jacmel, Croix-des-Bouquets, and Saint-Marc, and the Colonial Assembly based in Cap Français had very little control or influence outside of the North Province. In January 1792, the first Civil Commission sent from France embarked on a diplomatic mission to the West and South Provinces to initiate negotiations between whites and free people of color.

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<sup>432</sup> Ibid, 2-3.

By following the coverage of the *Moniteur Générale*, a daily newspaper in Cap Français devoted to reporting on the Colonial Assembly, we can see how it contributed to the racialization of political discourse under these circumstances. Throughout the winter of 1792, the *Moniteur* printed reports on the movement of free people of color in the West and South almost daily. These reports came exclusively from the perspective of whites and they stressed the criminality of the actions of free people of color, which supported the Colonial Assembly's opposition to the diplomatic mission of the Civil Commission. In its January 17 issue, the *Moniteur* printed an address from the Colonial Assembly supporting the whites of Port-au-Prince, who were putting up the strongest resistance to the free colored armies. Commenting on the patriotism of Port-au-Prince's white population, it called on "all the *bons citoyens* of Port-au-Prince to unite against the enemies of public tranquility."<sup>433</sup> In this representation of the situation, free men of color were clearly the "enemies of public tranquility," while whites were positioned as the "good citizens." In addition to stoking the flames of white resistance to the men of color, the Colonial Assembly explicitly expressed its opposition to the work of the Civil Commission in the West and South. Noting that "the *habitans blancs* have been forced to give in to the pretensions of the *hommes de couleur*," an address from the Colonial Assembly printed in the *Moniteur* commented on the failure of the Civil Commission to restore order and to "divert" the men of color from their "sinister projects."<sup>434</sup> The image of free men of color as villains became so prevalent in public discourse that an editorial comment in the *Moniteur* on some letters from the South Province read in the Colonial

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<sup>433</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 1, no. 64 (January 17, 1792), 260.

<sup>434</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 1, no. 69 (January 22, 1792), 280.

Assembly asserted that they “announced what everyone presumes, that is to say, all the horrors possible on the part of the *hommes de couleur*.”<sup>435</sup>

Despite the objections of the Colonial Assembly, the Civil Commissioners continued their efforts to mediate a settlement between whites and free people of color into the spring of 1792. “As conciliators, as missionaries of peace,” they promised, “we will never cease to preach the pardon of injuries and the forgetting of the past.”<sup>436</sup> In March, the Civil Commission issued an order to the municipality of Port-au-Prince and the Provincial Assembly of the West (based in Port-au-Prince) forbidding them from ordering “sorties” against the free men of color camped outside the city at Croix-des-Bouquets.<sup>437</sup> For its part, the Colonial Assembly declared such a measure on the part of the Civil Commission as an unconstitutional attempt to undermine the legal authority of the colony’s representative institutions, and it encouraged those bodies to ignore the order from the Civil Commission.<sup>438</sup> Hostility toward the commissioners continued to mount within the Colonial Assembly, and one member even proposed a motion to ask France to have them recalled.<sup>439</sup> The Colonial Assembly also continued to publicize and praise the victories of Port-au-Prince’s white forces over the armies of free men of color in the West, such as the white agitator Borel’s successful attack on the free colored outpost at Artibonite. In response to the news of Borel’s success, the assembly requested that Governor Blanchelande send 160 men to counter the “recent invasion by the *hommes de*

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<sup>435</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 1, no. 74 (January 27, 1792), 299.

<sup>436</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 1, no. 110 (March 3, 1792), 444.

<sup>437</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 1, no. 120 (March 13, 1792), 485.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid*, 486.

<sup>439</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 1, no. 121 (March 14, 1792), 487.

*couleur ...*” in Artibonite.<sup>440</sup> While the Civil Commission was working to reduce potential hostile encounters between whites and free people of color in the West and South Provinces, the Colonial Assembly was stoking the flames of a race war, suggesting that “these villains have sworn the ruin of the European race: they have expressed themselves clearly on this regard, and their friends can no longer doubt it.”<sup>441</sup>

With no resolution to the civil war between whites and free people of color in sight, pressure began to mount on the Colonial Assembly to invoke its initiative on the political status of free people of color to help resolve the crisis. In a letter to the assembly, Governor Blanchelande “asked the assembly to pronounce without delay on the political status of the *hommes de couleur*, this work alone is capable of terminating the disorder that has reigned for so long in this colony.”<sup>442</sup> The Colonial Assembly, though, stood obstinately behind its November 5 decree instead, and it informed Blanchelande that he “remains required to employ, without delay, all the forces that are entrusted to him to make return under the law all the seditious, incendiary, and murdering *hommes de couleur et nègres libres* and to finally put an end to the slave revolt.” Reinforcing its November 5 decree, the Colonial Assembly compared ruling on the status of free people of color during a revolt to “a judge to whom a client has come demanding a judgment with a pistol in hand.”<sup>443</sup> While in this state of political limbo, wielding military power but technically in revolt against the legal authorities, free people of color

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<sup>440</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 1, no. 122 (March 15, 1792), 493.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>442</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 1, no. 132 (March 25, 1792), 533.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*

were represented negatively in public discourse as a group of criminals waging an unjust race war.

The Colonial Assembly's staunch position on the status of free people of color disguised a fundamental shift in the balance of power outside the North Province of Saint-Domingue. Not waiting for the all-white Colonial Assembly to decide their fate, free men of color in the West Province took matters into their own hands. In late April 1792, "the rural *pompon blanc* landowners and the powerful network of armed free men of color had made an alliance" that included fourteen parishes to suppress an uprising of slaves in the region surrounding Port-au-Prince.<sup>444</sup> After persuading the slaves to return to their plantations, Pinchinat and his white planter allies formed the Council of Peace and Union in Saint-Marc on May 10, 1792 as a political counterweight to the all-white Colonial Assembly in Cap Français. Roume, a member of the first Civil Commission, had been on mission in the West Province for months working to broker a peace to the civil war between whites and free men of color. As we have seen, the Colonial Assembly attempted to discredit Roume's mission and cast free men of color as nothing more than a bunch of criminals in revolt against the law and legally sanctioned authority in the colony. Roume had come to see that backing the armed free men of color in the West was the only means to restore order, and he endorsed the Council of Peace and Union "as the legitimate representative of the colony's population," even though it would challenge the authority of the Colonial Assembly. The council served as the top civil authority in the West Province, and it represents an historic victory for free men of color, who, through the council, had access to power in ways previously denied them. The formation

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<sup>444</sup> Jeremy Popkin, "The French Revolution's Royal Governor: General Blanchelande and Saint-Domingue, 1790-92," *William and Mary Quarterly* vol. 71, no. 2 (April 2014), 220.



of the Council of Peace and Union, thus, indicates that the balance of power was shifting toward free men of color even before the arrival of the April 4 law granting them political rights.<sup>445</sup>

Several weeks later, in May 1792, the political state of free men of color was raised in the Colonial Assembly again. The debates took on a tumultuous character, and the language invoked to identify and discuss free people of color as a group created a discursive situation reflecting the colonial-era racist mentality. One member of the assembly argued that slavery was maintained by the idea among blacks “of the superiority of the white species.”<sup>446</sup> In his view, “the intermediary class of *affranchis*” was necessary to maintain the notion of white superiority among slaves, and, thus, granting political rights to free men of color would challenge the entire foundation of slavery.<sup>447</sup> This classic argument repeated incessantly since the start of the French Revolution indicates that some members of the Colonial Assembly would not be willing to grant political equality to free men of color under any circumstances, regardless of whether the slave revolt had been defeated or not. At a time when even their own delegation that had been sent to France was writing back to Saint-Domingue to encourage the Colonial Assembly to make concessions to free people of color before the French assembly did so, a vocal segment of the white population remained intransigent on the free colored issue.

The debate carried on for several more days behind closed doors, when on May 23, a white mob stormed the meeting house of the assembly demanding to be heard. The

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<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

<sup>446</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 2, no. 1 (May 15, 1792), 1-2.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid.

*patriotes*, as the mob referred to itself, expressed their desire to die rather than “bend anew under the yoke of the *ancien regime*.”<sup>448</sup> Although ostensibly directed at counter-revolutionaries, the remarks by the *patriotes* and their invasion of the government house were more about the Colonial Assembly’s debates on the political state of *libres de couleur*, as whites opposed to equality believed that the maintenance of white supremacy was necessary to defeat the counter-revolution—a belief inspired by the alliance in the West and South between free people of color and white royalists. In response to the pressure applied from white antagonists bitterly opposed to granting free men of color political equality, the Colonial Assembly decreed that there would be no change in the status of free people of color until the slave revolt had ended.

The very next day, though, the Colonial Assembly learned of the French Legislative Assembly’s April 4 law granting full and unconditional political equality to free men of color.<sup>449</sup> When the more limited May 15 law granting equality to free men of color born to free parents had arrived, the Colonial Assembly protested its constitutionality and refused to recognize it, which set a tone that ultimately led to armed conflict between whites emboldened by the assembly and free men of color inspired by the May 15 law. However, this time around circumstances were different. The Colonial Assembly immediately retracted its order from the previous day and promised to respect the new law.<sup>450</sup> The assembly’s turnabout was driven primarily by its desperation for aid from France and the realization that receiving any aid was dependent upon submitting to French law.

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<sup>448</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 2, no. 9 (May 23, 1792), 33.

<sup>449</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 2, no. 10 (May 24, 1792), 38-39.

<sup>450</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 2, no. 15 (May 29, 1792), 58.

The Colonial Assembly's promise to respect the April 4 law set a new tone and initiated a shift in the representation of free people of color in colonial public discourse. The discourse surrounding free people of color shifted to emphasize their importance to colonial society and the need for unity between whites and people of color. While the voices speaking in the press in the weeks following the April 4 law were still predominantly white ones, those voices articulated a much different message. In an address to "all free men of Saint-Domingue," the Colonial Assembly spoke about the need for "an open and loyal reunion with the effect of directing all forces against the common enemy."<sup>451</sup>

Previously held in a state of political limbo and technically in revolt against the legally constituted authority in the colony, free men of color now obtained a legal status through parliamentary decree that consolidated the position they had won with military force in parts of the West and South. After the April 4 law was passed in France, Julien Raimond wrote to his "brothers and friends" in Saint-Domingue advising them to not be vain enough "to believe that you must be carried to the top positions, without the talent and the virtue necessary for fulfilling them."<sup>452</sup> However, free colored leaders in the colony were anxious to translate their newly-minted political status into immediate political influence. In April 1792, Pinchinat and his allies had formed the Council of Peace and Union in Saint-Marc. Though the council had been formed without his approval, Governor Blanchelande sanctioned it after the arrival of the April 4 law as a result of Roume's insistence that he support the free men of color in the West against

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<sup>451</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 2, no. 28 (June 11, 1792), 111.

<sup>452</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 2, no. 56 (July 9, 1792), 125.

whites in Port-au-Prince putting up resistance to the authority of the council. As part of this effort, Blanchelande looked the other way at the council's arrest of many *petit blanc* radicals who opposed the April 4 law, including Borel, a member of the Colonial Assembly and the leader of a white militia that had attacked a free colored stronghold in the spring of 1792. Borel's arrest and detention elicited a strong response from the Colonial Assembly, though it was powerless to secure his release because of the council's hold over the West Province.

Anger over Borel's arrest spurred the emergence of a countervailing rhetoric in public discourse about the effects of the April 4 law that promoted white solidarity instead of the predominant message of unity and reconciliation. Speeches delivered in the Colonial Assembly in response to Borel's arrest indicate that many members of the assembly still saw events in Saint-Domingue, despite statements about forgetting the past and moving forward as equal citizens, through a racialist lens: "us" vs "them"/"whites" vs "people of color." To the Colonial Assembly, Blanchelande's refusal to intervene in Borel's arrest showed them that he was against "us." In July 1792, a letter from Saint-Marc announcing Borel's arrest informed the assembly that "the unfortunate inhabitants of Saint-Domingue are being punished for their patriotism and for their devotion, and I will go further, I would add for their obedience to the law."<sup>453</sup> When one of the members stated that nothing could be done by the Colonial Assembly to assist Borel, a deputy named Gault demanded "How, messieurs, is it not possible! Have you found anything impossible for releasing the *hommes de couleur*? ... It is unheard of that one permits himself to say that it is not possible when we have not found anything impossible for

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<sup>453</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 2, no. 48 (July 1, 1792), 192-94.

proving to the *hommes de couleur* your frankness and your loyalty.”<sup>454</sup> Asking why Borel was found holding a stockpile of weapons in the first place, a deputy named De Pons answered that it was “because the race of freedmen exercise in [the West Province] of the colony ... all the horrors of a war of cannibals, the European race was bound to take itself in a state of defense.”<sup>455</sup>

Language that represented continuing political division in the West and South as a race war that threatened to destroy the “European race” continued to circulate in the summer following Borel’s arrest. In response to Blanchelande’s steps to curtail white radicalism in Port-au-Prince, a member of the Colonial Assembly asked how the governor could continue to “ignore the enormous destruction of the white species by the *hommes de couleur libres* and the slaves.”<sup>456</sup> Although Blanchelande’s strategy in the West Province was aimed at creating political stability, the Colonial Assembly could not see beyond a racialized worldview. The colonial racist mentality built-up over a century could not be overcome with the stroke of a pen despite the hopes of revolutionaries in France who had championed the April 4 law.

Nevertheless, the situation in Saint-Domingue had decisively changed by July 1792. With the formation of the Council of Peace and Union in Saint-Domingue and the passage of the April 4 law in France, free people of color were now triumphant on both sides of the Atlantic. Their political position had been fortified by the French Legislative Assembly’s April 4 law and its decision to send 6,000 troops and two new Civil Commissioners to enforce the law. In Saint-Domingue, the endorsement of Roume and

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<sup>454</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 2, no. 49 (July 2, 1792), 195.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>456</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 2, no. 55 (July 8, 1792), 119.

Governor Blanchelande and their combined effort to defeat the white radicals based in Port-au-Prince further consolidated the position of the Council of Peace and Union. In coordination with the council, Roume and Blanchelande led a military expedition composed primarily of free colored troops against Port-au-Prince at the beginning of July. With this show of force against any resistance to the April 4 law, Roume was able to secure promises from the leaders of Port-au-Prince that they would respect the April 4 law and turn over the “most notorious” agitators against recognizing the political equality of free men of color. The defeat of Port-au-Prince’s radical white faction in July 1792 represents a significant victory for free people of color, as it signaled the open alliance between the armed free men of color and the representatives of the national government, the supremacy of the mixed-race Council of Peace and Union over the all-white Colonial Assembly, and the willingness of free men of color and the colonial administration to use force against whites who refused to accept the new situation.<sup>457</sup>

The language of race adapted to the new political situation as well. In the aftermath of the colony’s patriotic celebration of the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, the *Moniteur* printed an article titled “Prejudice Vanquished” that indicated to readers that a reunion between whites and free people of color might actually be taking place. “Prejudice Vanquished” described a banquet hosted by the *citoyens de couleur* for the white citizens of Le Cap. The author, presumably H. D. Saint-Maurice, editor of the *Moniteur*, described seeing figures from the Colonial Assembly, the executive administration, the municipality, the various military corps, and “a crowd of white citizens, eating and drinking with the *citoyens de couleur*, in public, and by their

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<sup>457</sup> Popkin, “The French Revolution’s Royal Governor,” 222.

invitation.”<sup>458</sup> Despite the fact that many radical whites remained opposed to the April 4 law, even openly revolting against it in the district of Grand-Anse, the article “Prejudice Vanquished” promoted a discursive situation that erased the remaining tension between whites and people of color and portrayed the colony as totally submitted to the April 4 law and onboard with the project of reconciliation.

After the suppression of Port-au-Prince radicals in July, the racially charged rhetoric from the Colonial Assembly aimed at promoting white solidarity largely disappeared from public discourse. The Colonial Assembly now realized that it could not publicly challenge the April 4 law. Attempts to undermine the position of free people of color now took the form of attacks on the “administrative despotism” of Blanchelande rather than direct assaults on the principle of equality or the rights of free men of color, and the Colonial Assembly now became eager to demonstrate its submission to the April 4 law. As illustrated by the article cited earlier, “Prejudice Vanquished,” the dominant discourse emphasized the end of color prejudice and the dawn of a new era of peace and reconciliation. Thus, with the triumph of free people of color on both sides of the Atlantic, the official discourse in France and Saint-Domingue became a race neutral language that saw all citizens as equal and disavowed the legitimacy of any distinctions among groups based on color.

However, despite public assurances that all parties were onboard with the project of reconciliation, episodes of racial violence continued to trouble the colony. On August 13 in Cap Français, a free black man named Hasard was seriously wounded by a white man named Sourbes as both men tried to break up a fight between two slaves. Although

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<sup>458</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 2, no. 68 (July 21, 1792), 182.

authorities in Le Cap arrested Sourbes and a surgeon attempted to treat the wounds of Hasard, free men of color organized to protest the incident. The free men of color were dispersed, but the next day, a street fight broke out between a group of whites and free men of color. A free man of color, Desmangles, was killed in the fighting, which prompted the free men of color to arm themselves and take position in their barracks. The joint effort of the Colonial Assembly, the Provincial Assembly of the North, and the municipal council of Le Cap was able to de-escalate the situation, but the events of August 13-14 demonstrated that Cap Français, and Saint-Domingue in general, was still vulnerable to explosions of violence along racial lines.<sup>459</sup>

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<sup>459</sup> Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 82-84.



## Chapter Six: Conclusion

The decision of Civil Commissioner Roume and Governor Blanchelande to align themselves with the Council of Peace and Union against white radicals in Port-au-Prince signified that the movement of free men of color had prevailed in the West Province. For the time being, though, the all-white Colonial Assembly was still intact and governing in the North Province. Although the Colonial Assembly had promised to accept the April 4 law and avoided making a direct challenge to political equality, it continued to denounce the “ministerial despotism” of Blanchelande, largely due to his actions against whites in Port-au-Prince. However, the arrival of the Second Civil Commission, sent from France to enforce the April 4 law, put pressure on the Colonial Assembly especially, and whites more generally, to publicly embrace racial equality, which initiated a paradigm shift in the language of race in colonial public discourse. The Second Civil Commission was dispatched from France with expansive powers to bring colonial society in line with the April 4 law, and, significantly, the second commission was sent with the muscle in the form of nearly 6,000 French troops to back up its project. Also, as an article in the *Moniteur* from June 1792 indicated, colonists were aware that two of the Civil Commission’s members, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Étienne Polverel, were “dear friends of Brissot.”<sup>460</sup> This allusion to Brissot positioned the commissioners as radicals sympathetic to the cause of free people of color in the minds of many white colonists before they had even arrived in Saint-Domingue.

Once in the colony, the Second Civil Commission immediately began trying to assess the political landscape, determining who could be trusted and relied upon to help

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<sup>460</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, June 21, 1792.

them perform their work. Early on the commissioners turned to whites in the colonial and municipal government; however, they quickly grew to mistrust these individuals, seeing them as only giving lip service to equality while working behind the scenes to obstruct the work of the Commission. Thus, the Civil Commission, especially Sonthonax, grew to increasingly rely on free people of color as the only trustworthy group in the colony. As a result, Sonthonax forged a strong alliance with free people of color and took progressively stronger action against radical whites who opposed the April 4 law. These efforts culminated with the deportation of radical white leaders in January 1793 and the formation of military units composed of free men of color, so that the Civil Commission would have a military force loyal to it at its disposal.

Sonthonax's actions against radical whites in the North Province and his close cooperation with free men of color significantly increased their political position. As a result, whites who at heart may have bitterly opposed racial equality were pressured to, at least publicly, acknowledge the fundamental principles endorsed by the French government with the April 4 law or face being detained by Sonthonax as a threat to public security. Public pressure to embrace revolutionary principles led to a discursive paradigm that defined race and citizenship in universal terms. Accordingly, during the spring of 1793, discourse relating to free people of color emphasized the need for reconciliation between "all free classes and colors" in order to form an "indissoluble brotherhood."<sup>461</sup> The new discursive paradigm in the *Moniteur* defined the relationship between free people of color and whites in fraternal rather than paternal terms, thereby including free men of color in the fraternity at the heart of the national fiction.

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<sup>461</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, December 11, 1792.

During the climax of Sonthonax's crackdown against radical whites, the language used to refer to people of color as a political group changed to reflect the disavowal of race in the new discursive paradigm. For instance, many sources in the *Moniteur* used a variety of euphemisms to designate free people of color that avoided making African ancestry or color the key marker of the group. One report from Les Cayes mentioned "men formerly qualified of color," a printed statement from Sonthonax defended the colony's "regenerated citizens," and a quote from Polverel in the *Moniteur* spoke of "the class of people formerly oppressed."<sup>462</sup> This disavowal of race as a category of distinction or qualification grew out of the perception that because French law no longer recognized racial distinctions among citizens it was not an acceptable part of public discourse.

Clearly, however, despite the fact that the language used in public discourse tended to reinforce the idea that all free citizens are equal and should be united, volatile racial tension remained, especially in Cap Français. In June 1793, only a few days after the *Moniteur* published a sympathetic description of a dinner party held by Sonthonax and Polverel to honor the citizens of color and their "defeat" of white radicals, tensions between whites and people of color exploded, leading directly to the burning of Le Cap and Sonthonax's offer of emancipation to any slaves willing to fight for him against the whites who had risen against his authority under political rival Governor François-Thomas Galbaud. The burning of Cap Français and Sonthonax's subsequent abolition of slavery opened up a new chapter in the history of Saint-Domingue, leading ultimately to the independence of Haiti in 1804.

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<sup>462</sup> *Le Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*, March 14, 1793; April 1, 1793; June 11, 1793.

The language of race that emerged in Saint-Domingue in 1793 reflects a pattern identified by Richard Cobb in his study of republican language during the Terror. Cobb notes that republicans sought to create a new world order by inventing a new way to talk about the situation. He argues that republican language from 1793-94 “was a vast charade in which the official nomenclature and the official costumes contrasted quite horribly with the ugly realities that they may have been designed to disguise.”<sup>463</sup> Similarly, the republican embrace of racial equality in the colonies resulted in an official disavowal of race in public discourse and the use of a race neutral language to identify groups in colonial society, yet we see that racial tensions continued to divide groups along racial lines, culminating in the burning of Cap Français in June 1793.

Cobb sees in the Thermidorian reaction against the Terror “a revolt against a public language that had become totally divorced from private discourse.”<sup>464</sup> The defeat of the Parisian dictatorship brought about a new vigor to public language now freed from the pressure to conform to the directives of the Committee of Public Safety, reviving dissention and debate. Interestingly, the language of race adapted to the new political environment as well. Historian Jeremy Popkin has recently studied the debates about the colonies during the Directory, and he has found that some of the major figures involved in the debates from 1791-1792 re-emerged in 1797 and revived the racialist language from the early period of the Revolution in an attempt to have the National Convention’s 1794 abolition of slavery overturned. Thus, a dynamic interplay between politics, language, and race remained part of the story of the French Revolution in the years after

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<sup>463</sup> Richard Cobb, “Language,” in *The French Revolution: Conflicting Interpretations*, Frank A. Kafker and James M. Laux, eds. (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Co., 1989), 303.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid*, 307.

this study ends in 1792, demonstrating that throughout the Revolution language was at the heart of articulating and legitimizing competing visions of society and its power relations.

This dissertation has traced the development of French racialist language from the colonial era to the revolutionary period up to the April 4, 1792 law granting political equality to all free people of color in the French colonies. Chapter two examined the formation of the French language of race in colonial-era discourse by analyzing a diverse assortment of sources from both the metropole and the colonies, including dictionaries, encyclopedias, philosophical treatises, commentaries by colonial jurists, and legal codes. It argued that the late-seventeenth-century language of race borrowed heavily from the Spanish linguistic system and defined racialist terms in the Spanish colonial context, but as the French New World colonies grew in complexity and importance, French racialist language developed an increasingly diverse and complex vocabulary to give meaning to new groups and the relationship between them in a French colonial context.

French legal codes regarding colonial slavery from the late-seventeenth century reveal a striking focus on civil status rather than race. Over time, legal documents regarding slavery began to incorporate more racialist terminology into their provisions, indicating a heightened awareness of race and greater influence of racialist thinking in legal discourse. Laws issued in France policing the entry of slaves and free people of color into the country suggest a growing preoccupation with maintaining an imagined French racial purity in the metropole. With the connection of race and status in legal discourse, we see that over the course of the eighteenth century blackness became a sign of a degraded or inferior racial character.

Metropolitan and colonial discourse of the pre-revolutionary era increasingly defined belonging to civil society in racial terms. Aubertueil's *Considerations* (1776) argued that an "indelible stain" must be attached to all free people of color in Saint-Domingue up to the sixth degree removed from slavery. At the same time in France, the *Police des Noirs* sought to exclude people of color from the nation, seeing their color as a threat to French racial purity. Thus, on the eve of the French Revolution, racialist distinctions among groups were seen as legitimate considerations, and Moreau de Saint-Méry's elaborate tableau of over a dozen different racial groups defined by phenotype represented a serious intellectual enterprise.

Chapter three examined the racialist language employed in debates over political rights for free people of color from the start of the French Revolution to the passage of the May 15, 1791 law granting political equality to free people of color born to free parents. It explored the initial challenge to the racialist system constructed during the colonial era by lobbyists for free colored political equality. Part of the lobbying campaign on behalf of free people of color involved defining their group and framing its role in colonial society for metropolitan audiences. The discourse that emerged from these debates, culminating in the May 15 law, privileged the cause of *hommes de couleur* and silenced the concerns of *nègres libres*, thereby embracing egalitarianism while reflecting traditional colonial prejudices against free blacks.

Tracing the discourse advanced by lobbyists for free people of color and pro-colonial lobbyists in Paris, I argue that in 1789 there emerged two competing definitions of free people of color within the metropolitan discursive space. The language employed by supporters of political rights for free people of color defined the group as a unified and

cohesive unit, downplaying any divisions between people of mixed European and African ancestry and free blacks to avoid a discussion of whether phenotype should impact citizenship. The rhetoric of colonial whites and their supporters in Paris highlighted divisions among free people of color in order to justify their own prejudices and to inject racialist language into the debate over political rights.

Chapter four examined the language of race in France and Saint-Domingue from the May 15 law to its repeal in September 1791. The language of race employed by supporters of the May 15 law embraced the “Frenchness” of the targets of the law under the logic of assimilation. Free people of color enfranchised by the new law were regarded as assimilated and French, while the *affranchis* left disenfranchised by the law were positioned as unassimilated and not sufficiently French to be deserving of inclusion in the national community. Chapter four also examined the countervailing rhetoric that emerged in France after the May 15 law that emphasized the “Africanness” of people of color to undermine the notion that they could be assimilated to Europeans and belong to the nation. This rhetoric advanced a racialist definition of the nation that rested on notions of blood purity embedded in the colonial language of race.

Whites in Saint-Domingue reacted with hostility to the May 15 law. Although the enfranchisement was limited to a small segment of the free colored population, whites immediately refused to recognize the law under any circumstances. The colonial press helped circulate a message of white solidarity in resistance to the new law, and decrees and addresses from the colony’s all-white political assemblies infused public discourse with the language of the colonial racialist mentality. Colonial whites embraced a language of race that placed emphasis on blood or descent rather than embracing a

language of assimilation. The refusal of whites to recognize the May 15 law led to increased tensions and, ultimately, fighting between free men of color determined to secure their rights and whites determined to maintain the colonial order of white supremacy in Saint-Domingue.

With news arriving in France of the agitated state of the colony, pressure began to mount on the French assembly to repeal the May 15 law. The September 24, 1791 law repealed the May 15 law and ended France's brief experiment with a colonial policy based on assimilation. The language of the September 24 law revived the colonial racialist formulation "hommes de couleur et nègres libres," and, thus, with the reversal of the political status of free people of color, there was a reversal in the metropolitan language of race as well.

At the same time that we see a reversal of language in France, free people of color in Saint-Domingue were advancing their own language of race through military force. Organized under the leadership of Pierre Pinchinat and Louis-Jacques Bauvais, armed bands of free men of color were able to force white leaders in the West Province of Saint-Domingue to the negotiating table. The subsequent September concordats negotiated between whites and free men of color in the West recognized the political rights of free men of color and embraced an egalitarian language of race that placed "citoyens blancs" and "citoyens de couleur" on an equal level.

Chapter five examined the use of racialist language from the repeal of the May 15 law in September 1791 to the passage of the April 4, 1792 law granting political rights to all free people of color in the colonies. It argues that the decree of the April 4 law in France and the formation of the Council of Peace and Union in Saint-Domingue



represented the triumph of free people of color on both sides of the Atlantic. In the summer of 1792, as a result of these developments, a racial language emerged that placed whites and free people of color on an equal level. Revolutionaries on both sides of the Atlantic sought to deracialize the public sphere in an effort to form an egalitarian society in line with the April 4, 1792 law.

With the arrival of the April 4 law, the Colonial Assembly immediately reversed its position on recognizing the rights of free people of color and expressed its acceptance of the new situation. The Colonial Assembly's acceptance of the April 4 law initiated a shift in the representation of free people of color in colonial public discourse to emphasize the need for reconciliation between free people of color and whites. A race neutral language emerged in public discourse from the effort to enforce the April 4 law, which speaks to the effort by revolutionaries to reshape colonial society and bring it in line with revolutionary values by deracializing the public sphere. This effort represents the first French attempt to synthesize republicanism and imperialism, resulting in the creation of a "republican empire."

The idea that the French empire should be used as a conduit to spread French republican values, such as liberty and equality, first emerged in this period and would re-emerge during the nineteenth and twentieth century as a central tenant of French imperialism under the Third Republic as part of the idea of the "mission civilisatrice."<sup>465</sup> Commenting on the past and future of the French empire at the end of World War II, Jacques Stern, Minister of the Colonies under Prime Minister Albert Sarraut in 1936, argued that the French empire was a positive influence on the world because of its role in

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<sup>465</sup> Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

spreading French values. Written at a time when the future of European imperialism was in serious question, Stern made a defense of the French imperial project. He argued that the French exercised a “humane” form of imperialism that gradually incorporated colonized subjects into the French nation and made them citizens.<sup>466</sup>

The first French experiment with creating colonial citizens occurred during the period under study in this dissertation. French revolutionaries attempted to reconcile their political ideals with colonial power structures by extending citizenship to colonial populations. Free people of color were the first test case in this approach. By granting political rights to free people of color in April 1792, France sought to make the colonies part of the national fraternity, and it became the first empire to make free people of color citizens on an equal footing with whites. However, the reconciliation between republicanism and imperialism that emerged from the genuinely trans-Atlantic debates of 1789-1792 was fragile at best because it failed to address the issue of slavery and, in particular, the movement for freedom undertaken by slaves of the North Province in August 1791. The attempt to integrate the much larger and much less assimilated slave population into the French Republic after the 1794 abolition of slavery proved more difficult and would lead to the independence of Haiti in 1804. The legacy of the assimilationist policy first worked out from 1789-1792, though, can still be seen through the examples of Martinique and Guadeloupe.

Today, Martinique and Guadeloupe are departments of France, and people born there have French citizenship and elect deputies to the French National Assembly. The ideology behind these policies first emerged from the negotiation of race, nation, and

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<sup>466</sup> Jacques Stern, *The French Colonies: Past and Future* (New York: Didier, 1944), 258.

citizenship in debates over political rights for free people of color from 1789-1792.

People of color in the Antilles advocated for the departmentalization of Martinique and Guadeloupe in the 1930s as a way to secure their political and social equality with local whites as well as those in the metropole. In a sense, they advocated for the fulfillment of a process that first began during the French Revolution.

The installation of the 1946 Constitution after liberation from Nazi occupation and the collapse of the Vichy regime reflects the influence of revolutionary ideals first articulated from 1789-92 on twentieth-century France. The 1946 Constitution embraced the principle of universalism first articulated during the French Revolution. Rejecting the racist policies imposed by the right-wing Vichy government during World War II, article 1 of the preamble to the Constitution of 1946 stated:

In the morrow of the victory achieved by the free peoples over the regimes that had sought to enslave and degrade humanity, the people of France proclaim anew that each human being, without distinction of race, religion or creed, possesses sacred and inalienable rights. They solemnly reaffirm the rights and freedoms of man and the citizen enshrined in the Declaration of Rights of 1789 and the fundamental principles acknowledged in the laws of the Republic.

Drawing explicitly on the Declaration of Rights, the Constitution of 1946 embraced the ideal of an undifferentiated citizenry where race was an illegitimate distinction among French citizens. Explicitly addressing colonial population groups, article 17 of the preamble declared: “The French Union shall be composed of nations and peoples who agree to pool or coordinate their resources and their efforts in order to develop their respective civilisations, increase their well-being, and ensure their security.” The assimilationist tendency of French imperialism can be seen in the final article of the Constitution’s preamble, which states that France “desires to guide the peoples under its responsibility towards the freedom to administer themselves and to manage their own

affairs democratically.”<sup>467</sup> This principle was also affirmed in the current French Constitution of 1958, which promised that “the Republic shall recognize the overseas populations within the French people in a common ideal of liberty, equality and fraternity.”<sup>468</sup> Similar to the course adopted between 1789-1792 to reconcile republicanism and imperialism, France likewise sought to apply its universalist ideals to colonial population groups after World War II, leading to the departmentalization of Martinique and Guadeloupe.

Despite becoming departments of France in 1946, though, Antilleans have found that full legal assimilation has not resulted in full social and economic equality, and, as debates over immigration have shown, people of color from the Antilles and other post-colonial territories are still regarded as outsiders and not fully French.<sup>469</sup> The color-blind language of race that emerged during the French Revolution helps explain the present French struggle with racism despite an avowed commitment to equality. The logic of French republican ideology resulted in the April 4, 1792 law granting political equality to all free people of color in the colonies with the hope of creating color-blind societies where race was not a category of distinction among the free population. However, the ideal never matched the social reality. While a race neutral language emerged to discuss the situation in Saint-Domingue, continued violence along racial lines indicate that race remained an important factor in determining allegiances and shaping events. In present-day France, the assimilationist tendency of France’s republican ideology disguises

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<sup>467</sup> Preamble to the French Constitution of 1946. Accessed via web: [http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/conseil-constitutionnel/root/bank\\_mm/anglais/cst3.pdf](http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/conseil-constitutionnel/root/bank_mm/anglais/cst3.pdf).

<sup>468</sup> French Constitution of 1958. Accessed via web: <http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/conseil-constitutionnel/english/constitution/constitution-of-4-october-1958.25742.html#PREAMBLE>

<sup>469</sup> David Beriss, *Black Skins, French Voices: Caribbean Ethnicity and Activism in Urban France* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), 60-64.

continued inequalities and discrimination against people of color from the Antilles as well as migrant and immigrant population groups from other post-colonial territories under a rhetoric of equal citizenship and absorption into the French nation.<sup>470</sup> As systemic inequalities exemplified by the Parisian *banlieues* indicate, though, the republican ideal of an undifferentiated citizenry has been largely unattainable.<sup>471</sup> While at first total absorption into the nation as equal citizens seemed like the answer to discrimination, now activist groups are forcing France to acknowledge difference in order to address social inequalities, thereby challenging the color-blind nature of French republican ideology to increase the visibility of “Black France.”<sup>472</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> Jeremy Jennings, “Citizenship, Republicanism, and Multiculturalism in France” *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 30, no. 4 (October 2000), 575; Didier Fassin and Sarah Mazouz, “What is it to become French? Naturalization as a Republican Rite of Institution” *Revue française de sociologie*, vol. 50, supplement (2009), 39; Sally Marthaler, “Nicolas Sarkozy and the Politics of French Immigration Policy” *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2008), 384.

<sup>471</sup> Dominic Thomas, *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration, and Transnationalism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 29-34.

<sup>472</sup>Ibid, 206.

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