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Gendered Dehumanisation; Labour, Oppression, and Resistance of the Enslaved Women of Colour of Saint-Domingue in the Long Nineteenth Century

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CENTRAL TO THE transatlantic slave trade, and the institution of chattel slavery, was the dehumanisation of Black people. In order to justify the terrible conditions and brutal treatment which enslaved people were forced to endure, it was necessary to view enslaved people not as people, but as property. The deeply racialised nature of transatlantic slavery permeated every aspect of early modern colonial life in the French Caribbean. This meant that this dehumanisation and racist treatment also affected the *gens de couleur*, despite their free status.[1] Enslaved women were not thought of by their enslavers as people, and were also constrained and oppressed specifically by their gender within their labour, avenues to manumission, and resistance. Their experience, both in terms of enslavement and of freedom from slavery, was therefore deeply gendered. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine have both expounded on the 'double burden' that enslaved women faced, being 'exploited as slaves in regards to both their productive and reproductive capacities'.[2] Looking specifically at the French colony of Saint-Domingue, formalised in 1697 and abolished with the creation of the nation state of Haiti in 1804, this article assesses the gendered ways in which enslaved and free women of colour were exploited.

This article argues that the enslaved women of colour in Saint-Domingue were both not thought of as women, or indeed people, by their enslavers, and yet were

[1] The term 'gens de couleur' here refers to free people of colour of any skin tone.

[2] David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, 'Introduction' in eds. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. ix.

repeatedly constrained and oppressed in a variety of gender-specific ways throughout Saint-Domingue's colonial existence. I begin by looking at understandings of womanhood, and the ways in which they did not apply to, or directly contradicted the lived experience of, enslaved women of colour. I then assess the labour of these women, and the way in which they were overworked as a result of their gender. I analyse sexualisation and sexual violence in depth, both crucial components of the lives of women of colour, particularly in relation to their treatment at the hands of white colonists. Next, I focus on the nature of motherhood and family for these women and the ways in which it was constrained, controlled, and damaged by the realities of slavery, and the cruelty of enslavers. Then, I examine how the very legislation of pre-revolutionary Saint-Domingue restricted the lives of women of colour and enslaved women due to their gender. Finally, I look at the gendered avenues of resistance to slavery which were present in Saint-Domingue. Although women of colour were active participants in all aspects of colonial life, from owning slaves to being revolutionary soldiers, the primary sources on, and from, Black and *mulâtre* women are notably lacking from the archives.[3] This kind of archival silence, not uncommon in the histories of marginalised peoples, can come as a result of purposeful exclusion by those in power as much as by a community's history and culture being recorded in a way which does not cater to archival norms.[4] As such, I will be unearthing the lives of these enslaved women of colour through the white colonial sources which have survived, with an awareness of the inherent bias within them, and the understanding that these sources are often written directly in opposition to the women who constitute this article's focus.

Understandings of Black Womanhood & Divisions of Labour

The nature of womanhood in the long nineteenth century was itself complex, particularly regarding enslaved women. The cult of 'true womanhood', as proposed by Barbara Welter, centred around the values of 'piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity', and was an idealised concept of womanhood intended to depict and

[3] The term *'mulâtre'* here refers to a mixed-race person, regardless of what degree of black or white heritage, free or enslaved.

[4] For more on the types and consequences of archival silences, see Rodney G. S. Carter, 'Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence', *Archivaria,* 61 (2006): 215–233.

shape upper- and middle-class white women.[5] Even among white Europeans, this idealisation of womanhood as submissive, even fragile, did not fully align with the increasing importance of the role of the *citoyenne* in French revolutionary politics. As Mary Louise Roberts, Welter's analysis of the cult of true womanhood 'failed to understand the cult as an ideology that performed political and cultural work' in the ways in which it reinforced and ensured women's subordinate role within wider society.[6] Moreover, the concept of 'true womanhood' applied specifically to wealthy white women. Linda Perkins argues that while working-class white women could aspire to the values of this ideology, this was not the case for Black women, who 'were not perceived as women in the same sense' – that is to say because Black people were not universally recognised as people.[7] As such, while ideas of womanhood were present in, and indeed important to, Saint-Domingue's society, this understanding of womanhood was fundamentally white. The specific, and different, role of Black womanhood was disregarded under plantation slavery, particularly by enslavers.

Jessica Marie Johnson argues that the trauma of the Middle Passage 'ungendered the captives…reducing woman and girls and boys and men to units of measured "flesh"'.[8] This deeply dehumanising experience had both physical and psychological ramifications for those who suffered through it. Purposeful dehumanisation, much like the consistent understanding and legal framework of enslaved people as merely property rather than people in their own right, allowed slaveowners to maximise the productivity of their labour force. By viewing them first by their unfree status, and only then accounting for personhood or gender, enslavers ultimately added to the double burden of enslaved women; enslaved women were expected to work hard, manual jobs for the same duration as their male counterparts. In fact, in the French Caribbean, proportionally more women worked the fields than

[5] Barbara Welter, 'The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860', *American Quarterly*, 18.2.1 (1966): 151-174 (p. 152).

[6] Mary Louise Roberts, 'True Womanhood Revisited', *Journal of Women's History,* 14.1 (2002): 150–155 (p. 151).

[7] Linda Perkins, 'The Impact of the 'Cult of True Womanhood' on the Education of Black Women', *Journal of Social Issues,* 39.3 (1983): 17–28 (p. 18).

[8] Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh; Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), p. 8.

men, despite this being the hardest manual labour task available on the plantations.[9] Despite being expected to work as many hours and equally strenuous tasks as enslaved men, enslaved women were much less likely to move into specialised work, such as carpentry or masonry.[10] These specialised roles made it easier to buy back freedom, as the worth of the work was much higher than that of field labour. By predominantly being denied this opportunity, enslaved women had even the potential for that method of manumission suppressed. In addition to this praedial work, enslaved women were given additional, gendered tasks, such as breastfeeding.[11]

Although enslaved women did not seek out the supposed privilege of becoming a domestic slave, and indeed 'broadly rejected the notion that to labour in the big house was "better" than working in the field', they were more likely than enslaved men to be moved to such a position.[12] Since the inception of the colony in 1697, women had been a minority population within Saint-Domingue, especially white women. This dynamic had greatly affected the role of enslaved women of colour within the colony. Julien Raïmond, a wealthy *affranchi* planter, argued that although colonists had initially only had sex with their slaves due to a dearth of female settlers, ultimately the colonists 'preferred girls of colour over these women'.[13] Even once there was a greater proportion of white women settled on the island, these relationships continued, therefore leading to the creation of a predominantly free *mulâtre* class. He also noted that colonists who did not marry women of colour often still 'chose from their slaves to care for them and their households', and went on to clarify that 'they made them into wives under the title of housekeeper', suggesting a sexually abusive component to this dynamic.[14] This

[9] Bernard Moitt, 'Slave Women and Resistance in the French Caribbean' in eds. Gaspar & Hine, *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, p. 239.

[10] David Geggus, 'Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint-Domingue' in eds. Gaspar & Hine, *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, p. 262.

[11] Moitt, p. 239.

[12] Emily West & R. J. Knight, 'Mothers' Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South', *Journal of Southern History,* 83.1 (2017): 37-68 (p. 50).

[13] Julien Raïmond, *Observations sur l'origine et les progrès du préjugé des colons blancs contres les hommes de couleur,* trans. my own (Paris: 1791), p. 4: 'les blancs leur preféroient des filles de couleur'. The term 'affranchi', originating in the 1770s, means 'a free person of colour or their descendant, no matter how many generations removed from slavery'.

[14] Raïmond, p. 4: 'se choisissoient des femmes parmi leurs esclaves, pour soigner leur ménage et leurs personnes', and 'ils en faisoient leurs femmes sous le titre de managére'.

highlights the complicated nature of the role of domestic slave or housekeeper, as while their role might nominally have been to manage the household affairs, there was some expectation or connotation of sex. Similarly, Deborah Jenson and Laurent Dubois both highlight the role of *menagère*, as described by Médéric-Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, a wealthy white creole planter.[15] The *menagère* was a domestic position for an enslaved woman of colour, and, according to Moreau de Saint-Méry, had 'all the functions of a spouse, without being necessarily inclined to assume the responsibilities of such a position'.[16] This particular depiction, as Dubois notes, was undoubtedly coloured by Moreau de Saint-Méry's personal relationship with his own *menagére*, Marie-Louise Laplane, with whom he had both a long relationship and a daughter, before ultimately parting ways with her to marry a white woman.[17]

The nature of the power dynamics between enslaver and the enslaved means that any relationship was non-consensual and abusive; the power imbalance of ownership is inherently coercive, regardless of whether the enslaved person is manumitted, or the relationship culminates in a legal marriage. Raïmond wrote on the acceptance of slaveowner and slave relationships after the initial settlement of the colony, and how they were not just legitimised through marriage to the slave woman in question, but that children born of such a union were raised free, given land, and often grew up to be slaveowners in their own right.[18] Although this shows the equity possible at times from a relationship which started as slaveowner and enslaved person, it cannot be said that the enslaved women in these relationships were ever truly willing participants. Although at the beginning of Saint-Domingue's colonisation, it was not uncommon for slave owners to marry the enslaved women with whom they were having relationships, particularly if they had children together, this changed over time. Almost two thirds of manumitted slaves in Saint-Domingue were women, and marrying a colonist was a common avenue of manumission, up until the late 1760s.[19] This

[15] See Deborah Jenson, *Beyond the Slave Narrative; Politics, Sex, and Manuscripts in the Haitian Revolution* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), pp. 277–281, and Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 68.

[16] Médéric-Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, as quoted in Jenson, p. 281.

[17] Dubois, p. 68.

[18] Raïmond, pp. 2-3.

[19] Geggus, 'Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint-Domingue', p. 268.

potential for liberty added another level of coercive power to any relationship between slave and slave-owner, and as David Geggus notes, many of Saint-Domingue's plantations functioned as 'harem[s]' for the planters and their white employees, because enslaved women were likely to submit to the sexual advances of their owners 'out of a mixture of fear and hope'.[20] Likewise, Raïmond declared that female slaves explicitly had 'their greatest recompense, their freedom' leveraged against them to coerce them into these relationships.[21] Yet, Jessica Marie Johnson has argued that sex as a common or successful avenue to manumission was predominantly a myth, rooted in 'slaveowning European travel writers' own lascivious assumptions' rather than in any reality or historical record.[22] Ultimately, whether or not manumission occurred is less relevant than the fact that it was being leveraged to coerce enslaved women into sexual acts.

Sexualisation and Sexual Violence

While purity and submissiveness were ideals ascribed onto white women by colonists, women of colour, particularly *mulâtre* women, were instead viewed predominantly as sexual objects by the white colonists. In 1797, Moreau de Saint-Méry, in writing a description of the Saint-Domingue colony, declared that 'the entire being of a *mulâtress* is dedicated to sensuality', and went on to rhapsodise on the 'most delicious ecstasies' which he believed to be the sole focus of *mulâtre* women's lives.[23] This commonly held perception, the overt sexualisation, and the objectification of *mulâtre* women, dehumanised *mulâtre* women in the eyes of the colonists, and allowed them to trivialise their problems. Moreau de Saint-Méry also wrote on the 'lure of the submissive *négresses*', showing that this sexualisation was not reserved solely for *mulâtre* women.[24] According to Desdorides, a lieutenant-colonel stationed in Saint-Domingue during the

[20] Ibid., p. 265.

[21] Raïmond, *Observations*, p. 2: 'elles attendoient leur plus grande recompense, leur liberté'.

[22] Johnson, p. 133.

[23] Médéric-Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie francaise de l'isle Saint-Domingue. Avec des observations généales sur sa population, sur le caractère & les moeurs de ses divers habitans; sur son climat, sa culture, ses productions, son administration, &c. &c.*, trans. my own (Paris, 1797), Volume 1, p. 92: 'L'être entier d'une Mulâtresse est livré à la volupté' & 'plus délicieuses extases'.

[24] Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Vol 1*, p. 90.

American Revolutionary War, 'mulatto, quadroon, and black women dress with taste, and use their appearance, their height, and their walk as an invitation to seduction'.[25] Crucially, Desdorides stated that these women 'avoid any other device or activity to excite men', reinforcing that this perceived 'seduction' was not actually reflective of the actions or intentions of these women of colour.[26] As Dorothy Roberts argued, this concept of innate lasciviousness led to white colonists claiming that Black women 'could not be raped'.[27] Enslaved women suffered differently than their male counterparts, facing gendered forms of sexual violence and degradation alongside the already brutal conditions of slavery. This fetishisation and objectification undoubtedly worsened the sexual assaults which both enslaved and free women of colour endured in the colony.

Writing in the mid-1780s, Raïmond described the custom of systematic rape and coercion enforced by the white colonists on the *gens de couleur*.[28] Raïmond related a common practice of white men walking into the homes of *hommes de couleur* and declaring their intent to have sex with their wife or daughter, resorting to coercion, violence, or even having the *homme de couleur* arrested, in order to get their way.[29] Stating 'sometimes it is a white whose official post gives him complete control over a man of color', it is clear that this practice was not limited to their slaves or servants, but instead underlined a hierarchy and societal power dynamic based on race which the white colonists had all become used to exploiting.[30] Notably, Raïmond at no point seemed to depict the ramifications of this custom on the women involved: although he stated that 'the white brings all manner of pressure to make the wife or daughter yield', the actual act of rape is only alluded to as the 'dishonour' of the *homme de couleur*.[31] While Raïmond thoroughly condemned this tradition, the systematic rape of *femmes*

[25] Desdorides, *Remarques sur la colonie de Saint-Domingue,* trans. my own (Paris: 1779), pp. 8-9: 'les mulâtresses, quarteronnes, et négresses se pârent avec gout; elles sont de leur maintien, de leur demarches, et de leur tailles un engagement à la séduction'.

[26] Ibid., p. 9.

[27] Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body; Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Random House, 1997), p. 31.

[28] The term 'gens de couleur' is here understood as free people of colour of any skin tone.

[29] Julien Raïmond, 'Trois Mémoires' in David Geggus, ed., *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2014), p. 14.

[30] Raïmond, 'Trois Mémoires', p. 14.

[31] Ibid.

de couleur in this manner is not framed as an abusive act in itself, so much as an abuse inflicted on the *hommes de couleur* they were related to.

Abbé Grégoire, an abolitionist and campaigner for human rights for all, commented in his 1790 *Letter to Those Who Love Mankind*, that the 'uncontrolled lechery of so many whites' made it impossible to control population growth in Saint-Domingue, making it clear that the coercion and rape of women of colour was well known.[32] For Grégoire, much like Raïmond, the sexual abuse suffered by these women of colour was not a priority; Grégoire was arguing that the class of *mulâtres* should be prioritised as it was ever increasing, as a result of the sexual abuse inflicted by white colonists. While neither of these men focus on this abuse, it is raised both by Raïmond and Grégoire in a perfunctory manner, belying the degree to which this sexual violence in the French Caribbean was common knowledge. These fleeting contemporary references to rape and coercion, therefore, are crucial, as to even acknowledge this as a form of abuse shows that there was a level of agency and personhood to be violated. This therefore suggests that enslaved people were not merely thought of as property but understood to be people with agency in their own right being infringed upon. It is therefore through this contemporary acknowledgement of their mistreatment that the degree of their personhood and their oppression is made clear.

Motherhood and Family

Already seen to some degree in the way in which slaveowners would coerce enslaved women into relationships, the role of enslaved women within the family is crucial to understand the extent to which both their labour and their oppression were gendered. Family was central to the culture and experience of those enslaved before their capture, and both the Transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery were reliant on the dissolution of the family unit.[33] The control which planters wielded over the lives and families of their slaves, from requiring the planters' consent to marry to being willing and able to sell members of their family to other plantations, was often geared towards

[32] Abbé Grégoire, *Lettre aux Philantropes; Sur les malheurs, les droits, et les réclamations des Gens de couleur de Saint-Domingue, et des autres îles françoises de l'Amérique*, trans. my own (Paris: 1790), p. 13: 'libertinage effréné d'un grand nombre de blancs'.

[33] LaRese Hubbard, 'Anna Julia Cooper and Africana Womanism: Some Early Conceptual Contributions' *Black Women, Gender, and Families,* 4.2 (2010), p. 35.

the discouragement of strong family bonds. As previously stated, many enslaved women were expected to work the fields as well as perform additional, gender-specific, roles; new mothers were sometimes forced to nurse the newborn babies of their owners, and subsequently to neglect their own children. Not only did this damage their relationship with their own children: by depriving the enslaved babies of most of their mother's milk it also increased the child's likelihood of malnourishment and infant mortality. Records show that at least one plantation had new mothers amongst their enslaved women work as wet-nurses, while their own children were suckled by the plantation's female goats.[34]

While Emily West's work has predominantly focused on the antebellum American South, the wider points of her analysis, undertaken alongside R. J. Knight, of enslaved women being forced to wet-nurse white children can certainly be applied to those enslaved in the French Caribbean. They argued compellingly that not only was the practice of forcing enslaved women to breastfeed their enslavers' infants exploitative, it was inherently abusive.[35] Not only did this practice endanger the health of their own children, but it was another avenue through which enslaved women's bodies and reproduction were controlled and manipulated by their enslavers. The usage of enslaved women of colour as wet-nurses was recommended, in part, because of the white European colonial belief that Black women had a 'superior ability to suckle'.[36] This idea predated transatlantic slavery and was based on the racist observations and conclusions of colonial European travellers to West Africa. These observations, focused predominantly on the breasts and bodies of the Black African women they had encountered, assigned decidedly bestial and animalistic traits to the women in question, and ultimately developed into the ideas both that Black women had particularly easy childbirths, and that they were well suited to hard manual labour.[37] In pre-revolutionary Saint-Domingue, there was a sense with some contemporary white colonists, such as Moreau de Saint-Méry, that enslaved women were particularly talented at motherhood, and that said children could 'never have more assiduous

[34] Jayne Boisvert, 'Colonial Hell and Female Slave Resistance in Saint-Domingue', *Journal of Haitian Studies* 7.1 (2001), p. 66.

[35] West & Knight, 37-68.

[36] Ibid., p. 39.

[37] Ibid., p. 40.

care'.[38] Moreau de Saint-Méry, as previously suggested, was likely influenced by Marie-Louise Laplane's behaviour as a mother to his daughter. Cruelly, the disruption that slavery caused to family connections for the enslaved, particularly with enslaved women being forced to stop breastfeeding their own children, with children or family units being split across different plantations, and with enslaved women forced to spend more time and energy raising their enslaver's children, meant that 'as far as slaveowners were concerned, they "were not mothers at all"', at least not to their own children.[39]

Motherhood was a particularly crucial and complicated aspect of slavery as, from the *Code Noir* onwards, liberty and slavery were literally maternal inheritances:

> Children, both male and girls, will follow the condition of their mother and be free like her, in spite of the servitude of their father; and that if the father is free and the mother enslaved, the children will be slaves the same.[40]

As the children of enslaved women were legally slaves, while the children of free women were free, regardless of the legal status of the father, motherhood held a very different legal role to that of fatherhood. Moreover, the relationship between resistance and motherhood in Saint-Domingue was extremely complicated, and made more so by the low fertility rate and high infant mortality rate which afflicted the slaves. The birthrate of the enslaved populace of Saint-Domingue was merely 3%, almost half the death-rate of acclimatised slaves.[41] There has been much debate over the degree to which the low birthrate was natural, or a product of abortion. Pregnancy was an extremely complex matter for female slaves, and the trauma of the passage to the Caribbean often caused temporary infertility.[42] Adding to this, the brutal working and living conditions of plantation slavery meant that the mortality rate for a newly arrived slave was 50% in the first year.[43] Furthermore, malnourishment and sleep deprivation were highly common issues, all of which increased the likelihood of miscarriage. Moreover, there was divided opinion amongst slaveowners as to whether slaves' pregnancies were

[38] Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Vol 1*, p. 41: 'Jamais … n'eurent de soins plus assidus'.

[39] Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, p. 33.

[40] *Le Code Noir*, Article 13.

[41] Moitt, p. 252. Having survived the initial relocation, and having been in Saint-Domingue for a year or two, a slave would have been considered 'acclimatised', and their death rate dropped to 5-6%.

[42] Boisvert, pp. 65–66.

[43] Moitt, p. 252; Boisvert, p. 66.

a benefit to them or a disadvantage. Some slaveowners considered slave children an investment, as they were legally their property and would grow up to become workers. As such, they would encourage their enslaved women to have children; they would offer payments to new mothers and their midwives, and some would even free the mothers of six living children.[44] Justin Girod de Chantrans, a visitor to Saint-Domingue in the 1780s, described a punishment given by some plantation owners to slave women thought to have had abortions: 'iron collars fitted with long spikes…which they have to wear day and night until they have produced a child for their master'.[45] His use of the phrase 'suspected of having abortions' suggests that this particular punishment could be given to any slave woman at her master's discretion, ultimately punishing the idea, not just the reality, of abortions, miscarriages, and infertility.[46] Other planters, however, considered the time which mothers needed to birth and nurse their children as a drain on resources, decreasing the efficiency of their workforce, and so they would encourage or pressure pregnant slaves to have abortions.[47] In either case, white colonists were inclined to believe that abortion or infanticide were at fault for low fertility or high infant mortality rates, rather than these being the result of the conditions of slavery. Both by forcing them to have children or abortions, enslavers controlled the bodies of enslaved women and their choices surrounding motherhood.

There were high infant mortality rates in Saint-Domingue, and there is little doubt that this was due in part to the harsh living conditions of plantation slavery, but white colonists tended to instead classify them as the result of purposeful infanticide as a method of slave resistance. Almost one third of enslaved children in Saint-Domingue died from tetanus, specifically presenting with lockjaw.[48] There was a common belief amongst colonists and plantation owners that midwives and mothers would use a needle to the fontanelle to induce lockjaw in newborns, and indeed at least one midwife

[44] Geggus, 'Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint-Domingue', p. 267.

[45] Justin Girod de Chantrans, *Voyage d'un Suisse dans différentes colonies d'Amérique*, trans. my own (Neuchatel: de l'Imprimerie de la Société typographique, 1785), p. 138: 'ces colliers de fer hérisses de longues branches…et qu'elles ne quittent ni le jour ni la nuit jusqu'à ce qu'elles aient donné un enfant à leur maître'.

[46] Chantrans, p. 138: 'des négresses soupconnées de s'etre fait avorter'.

[47] Boisvert, p. 66.

[48] Ibid., p. 67.

admitted to doing this while on trial.[49] She claimed that she had done this to hundreds of children in order to save them from having to live under slavery, but this confession came after some time under arrest, and it is impossible to tell whether it was coerced through torture. This does not preclude the possibility of infanticide as a form of resistance to slavery, however. Suicide as a form of slave resistance has been well-documented, as it both provided an escape from slavery and inflicted a punishment in the form of 'economic damage' to the slave-owner.[50] Although contemporaries considered slaves to be very good mothers, the conditions of slavery were so brutal that any form of escape or liberty was acceptable to some;[51] there survives a record of a mother and daughter about to be executed together, where, in order to help give her daughter courage, the mother declared 'Be glad you will not be the mother of slaves'.[52] This highlights the way in which women considered their choices; so constrained by their uniquely gendered form of subjugation, death was in itself a form of freedom, and perhaps so too was infanticide.

Overall, there were a variety of ways in which the labour and oppression of enslaved women of colour was directly tied to the reproductive capacity, and the role of 'mother'. The purposeful erosion of the family bonds of enslaved people by their enslavers was combined with the forced participation of enslaved women in family structures, whether through being forced to breastfeed their enslavers' children, or through incentivising childbirth. The nature of enslaved motherhood, and the complicated legacy of free or unfree status as a matrilineal inheritance, was a uniquely gendered aspect of the oppression of enslaved women. The burdens placed on enslaved women regarding pregnancy were manifold and varied depending on the plantation in which they were enslaved, but consistently enslaved women were exploited for their reproductive capacity.

[49] Boisvert, p. 67.

[50] Boisvert, p. 65.

[51] Geggus, 'Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint-Domingue', p. 266.

[52] Leota S. Lawrence, The Historical Perspective of the Caribbean Woman', *Negro History Bulletin*, 47.2 (1984): p. 38.

Legislative Curtailing of Women of Colour

The lives of people of colour, both free and unfree, were strictly legislated, first by the *Code Noir* in 1685, and then by ongoing legislation as the changing social position of people of colour was perceived by white colonists to threaten their own superiority. In the early 1770s, laws were introduced which punished white colonists for marrying any woman of colour by stripping them of their noble status and honours. Subsequently, planters were even less likely to marry their slaves, and although female slaves were still more likely to be manumitted than male slaves, there is no evidence to support whether this was related to their 'sexual availability'.[53] The marriage of women of colour was strictly legislated throughout Saint-Domingue's history. From the *Code Noir* in 1685 onwards, there were strict laws in place about the marriage of enslaved people, either to other enslaved people or to free people. The marriages between enslaved people were forbidden without the consent of their masters, but it was illegal for their masters to 'use any means to constrain their slaves to marry'.[54] There was some impetus for the owners of enslaved women to arrange marriages with enslaved men from other plantations, as any children of this union would be the legal property of the owner of the mother.[55] In practice, however, there were many enslaved people who chose to remain unmarried, and instead had long-term and fulfilling relationships with other enslaved people while maintaining personal independence, as opposed to seeking permission to marry from their owners. These partnerships depended on mutual respect, and the enslaved people involved would often amicably break up and find new partners later in life, dynamics unattainable under traditional European social mores.[56]

Despite the sexualisation of women of colour within Saint-Domingue, their sexuality was strictly legislated. Léger-Félicité Sonthonax's *Decree of General Liberty* in 1793, which abolished slavery, also included a law which stated 'Women who do not have an obvious source of income, who are not working agriculture or employed in someone's home…will be arrested and put in prison': this law was introduced as an

[53] Geggus, 'Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint-Domingue', p. 269; Johnson, p. 133.

[54] *Le Code Noir*, 'ou recueil des reglements rendus jusqu'a present', trans. John Garrigus, Article 11.

[55] *Le Code Noir,* Article 12.

[56] Geggus, 'Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint-Domingue', p. 264.

attempt to decrease prostitution.[57] Prostitution was a major sector of work available to women of colour in Saint-Domingue, due in part to the constant over-sexualisation of *négre* and *mulâtre* women by white colonists. Prostitution was particularly common in the port cities, such as Cap Français, Saint-Domingue being somewhat infamous for its prostitution.[58] One of the contributing factors towards its prevalence was the lack of other options available to women of colour. As enslaved women were not often trained in specialised fields, but were twice as likely to be manumitted as enslaved men, it could be very difficult for them to find a source of income once they were free.[59] It is clear from Sonthonax's decree, as well as a similar law passed in a proclamation by Toussaint Louverture in 1800, that prostitution had continued to such a degree, despite previous efforts to legislate against it, that they needed to legislate against it repeatedly to curb it.[60] Louverture was particularly preoccupied with prostitution as an immoral act, stemming from his strong Catholic views on the modesty and decency of women. In a proclamation made in 1801, Louverture reprimanded the vanity and 'libertinage' of women living in Saint-Domingue's cities.[61] Their narcissism was 'a result of their prostitution', according to Louverture, and they would 'harbor evil men, who live on the product of their crimes'.[62] He went on to strongly suggest that the cities' authorities should focus on eliminating prostitution, as opposed to finding or arresting these 'evil men'.[63] It is clear that, to Louverture, prostitution was an immoral act, both because it was dependent on women behaving in a manner which he considered to be sinful, and because he believed that it financed other criminal behaviours.

[57] Léger Félicité Sonthonax, 'Decree of General Liberty' in eds., Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2006; reprint, 2017), p. 114, specifically Article 34.

[58] Geggus, 'Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint-Domingue', p. 270.

[59] Ibid., p. 265.

[60] Toussaint Louverture, 'Regulations Respecting Field Labor' in ed., George F. Tyson Jr., *Great Lives Observed: Toussaint L'ouverture* (Englewood Cliffs: Spectrum, 1973), pp. 53–54.

[61] Toussaint Louverture, 'Proclamation 25 November' in *Jean-Bertrand Aristide presents Toussaint L'Ouverture; The Haitian Revolution*, ed. Nick Nesbitt (London: Verso, 2008), p. 67.

[62] Louverture, 'Proclamation 25 November', p. 67.

[63] Ibid., p. 67.

Pamphile de Lacroix described a function where Louverture 'was seen throwing his handkerchief over the bosom of a young lady' in order to preserve her modesty.[64] This emphasis on decency was undoubtedly related to Louverture's strong Catholic faith, as Lacroix wrote that Louverture insisted that women 'dress as if they were going to Church' when attending one of his events.[65] Louverture's wish to focus on modesty and decency, and to treat the *femmes de couleur* as society ladies, was also tied to his adoption of French citizenship; like Étienne Polverel, one of the French commissioners who worked alongside Sonthonax, he was adopting European conventions of womanhood and traditionally-European ideology about gender and society, and attempting to apply them to the women of colour in Saint-Domingue. Not only did he police their clothing and behaviour: Louverture strictly controlled women's access to his higher ranks, and allowed the race of the women with whom he was interacting to impact their position within his own social circle. Lacroix noted that while any white woman would be invited into Louverture's social circles 'by right', the only women of colour accepted were the wives of his high officials.[66] Moreover, after the public addresses were over, he and his male officers would retire to discuss policy; given that the female officers in the revolutionary army were often the wives of other officers, this exclusion would limit their influence and knowledge over current events.

Notably, one of the most famous laws passed during the French Revolution was the 1792 *loi autorisant le divorce*, in which the Legislative Assembly not only legalised divorce, but made it a civil institution. Prior to this, annulment was possible only with a special dispensation from the Pope, and there were no legal avenues for divorce. Marriage was important to Louverture, who defined it as a 'civil and religious institution' in his constitution of 1801, and intended to once again permanently outlaw divorce throughout the colony.[67] Beyond the theological justification of marriage underpinned by his strong Roman Catholic faith, he also believed that marriage helped to cultivate and strengthen morality and virtue, and wanted Saint-Domingue's government to

[64] Pamphile de Lacroix, 'Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue' in ed., Tyson, p. 83.

[65] Lacroix, p. 83.

[66] Lacroix, p. 83.

[67] Toussaint Louverture, *Constitution de Saint-Domingue* (1801), available on: https://haitidoi.com/constitutions/1805-2/, Articles 9, & 10.

recognise and distinguish spouses who were deemed notably virtuous.[68] Having made divorce illegal, Louverture also intended to introduce a legal framework to establish the rights and social status of those born out of wedlock.[69] These laws, Louverture declared, would be created and 'designed to spread and maintain social virtues, and to encourage and cement family bonds' among those born out of wedlock, despite their illegitimacy.[70] Lorelle Semley argued that Louverture's new measures were intended to '[maintain] families through bonds of marriage' more than they were about stopping relationships and partnerships from dissolving, suggesting that the role of the family as property-owner was more critical to maintain than the moral imperatives on married couples to stay together.[71] Comparatively, Jean-Jacques Dessalines' *Haitian Constitution of 1805* declared that marriage 'is a purely civil deed', and that divorce would be legal 'in certain specific cases'.[72] Given Dessalines was not Catholic, and also legalised freedom of worship, it is perhaps unsurprising that he legally changed marriage from a religious act and institution to having a secular and civil legal status.[73] In a proclamation in November 1801, Louverture announced that military or public officials 'who are legitimately married and keep concubines in their houses, and those who are unmarried and live publicly with several women are unworthy of command' and would lose their jobs immediately.[74] This enshrined into law Louverture's strong moral judgements regarding marriage, legally penalised the more informal relationships previously accepted within slave culture, and removed an avenue of personal freedom which had been available to women of colour.

[68] Ibid., Article 9.

[69] Ibid., Article 11.

[70] Ibid., Article 11, trans. my own: "qui tendront à repandre et à entretenir les vertus sociales, à encourager et cimenter les liens de famille".

[71] Lorelle D. Semley, 'To Live and Die, Free and French: Toussaint Louverture's 1801 Constitution and the Original Challenge of Black Citizenship', *Radical History Review,* 115 (2013), p. 75.

[72] Jean-Jacques Dessalines, *Constitution Impériale d'Haïti*, 1805, available on: https://haitidoi.com/constitutions/1805-2/, Articles 14, & 15.

[73] Ibid., Article 51.

[74] Toussaint Louverture, 'Proclamation of 4 Frimaire X' in ed., Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution*, p. 167.

Gendered Resistance

Grand marronage, the act of running away from plantations and establishing a separate settlement free of slavery, was a major aspect of slave resistance. Women tended to commit *marronage* far less than men, making up only 12-15% of Saint-Domingue's maroons in the eighteenth century.[75] While this was thought by some historians to be due to a combination of fear and sentimentality, Arlette Gautier and Bernard Moitt have both convincingly argued that the practical difficulty of either bringing a child on the run, or leaving a child behind, impacted the low numbers of female maroons.[76] Although women made up a significantly smaller percentage of maroons, they were arguably more critical for the longevity of *grand marronage*, as women overall had more knowledge of cultivation and agriculture, and were therefore key to creating a self-sufficient and long-lasting community.[77] Moreover, there is evidence that some female maroons would cross-dress in order to more easily escape suspicion, such as Magdelaine in 1790, who was described by her runaway advertisement as being 'in the habit of dressing up as a man and passing herself off as free', perhaps complicating the records of the gender divide within *marronage*.[78] Another key aspect of resistance, Nah Dove argued, was motherhood: specifically, the raising of children to resist the structures of slavery.[79] While nearly two thirds of enslaved people in Saint-Domingue were African-born, the importance of enslaved women raising their children to oppose and fight against slavery ought not be underplayed.[80] Furthermore, once slavery had been abolished, women would challenge the new form of forced labour by making use of the old laws regarding motherhood; Cecil, who had been a slave in Les Cayes, refused to work more than a six-day week as she had multiple children, insisting on her right to a tradition which had been set up under slavery to incentivise childbirth.[81]

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[75] Geggus, 'Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint-Domingue', p. 271.

[76] Such as Michael Craton, or Orlando Patterson. Moitt, p. 245.

[77] Moitt, p. 245.

[78] Affiches Américaines, in ed., Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution*, p. 34.

[79] Nah Dove, 'African Womanism: An Afrocentric Theory', *Journal of Black Studies,* 28.5 (1998), p. 534.

[80] Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti; The San Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), p. 25.

[81] Judith Kafka, 'Action, Reaction, and Interaction: Slave Women in Resistance in the South of Saint-Domingue, 1793–1794', *Slavery and Abolition,* 18.2 (1997), p. 65.

Colonists in Saint-Domingue used the lack of gender roles within slavery, and the de-gendering of women of colour, to suit them; similarly, they adopted a more traditionally European view of gender differentiation with regard to women of colour after Sonthonax's *Decree of General Liberty*, once doing so became more beneficial on a wider societal scale than de-gendering women of colour. Étienne Polverel laid out strict rules and regulations for plantation labour after emancipation in the Southern and Western Provinces in various proclamations throughout 1793 and 1794. In the rules he established in 1794, he introduced a key gender-based disparity which had not previously existed: while all *cultivateurs* were due to work the same hours and tasks as each other, female *cultivateurs* were to be paid less.[82] In Article 18, it was legally enshrined that 'women aged fifteen and above will have two-thirds of a share' while men working the same tasks would get one full share.[83] Despite the many complaints from female *cultivateurs*, Polverel was insistent that the 'natural inequality in the strength of men and women' meant that a lesser pay was justified, an inequality which had not impacted enslaved women who were expected to work the fields previously, as this supposed inequality of strength had not decreased the hours they were expected to labour in the fields.[84] Polverel also stressed the leave which was granted to pregnant women and new mothers, as well as leave taken due to women's 'usual and regular ailments', to highlight the differences between men and women, and to state that male *cultivateurs* worked more than their female counterparts despite having the same responsibilities and working hours.[85]

Moreover, Polverel argued that male *cultivateurs*' salaries would inevitably be spent on their female partners, and declared 'Africans, if you want these women to be reasonable, be reasonable yourself'.[86] By framing the complaints in this way, Polverel not only made the complaints of female *cultivateurs* seem unreasonable, but attempted to pit their demands against the male *cultivateurs* by appealing to a division between

[82] Étienne Polverel, 'The Plantation Policies of Étienne Polverel' in eds., Dubois and Garrigus, p.135. The term 'cultivateur' is here understood to be a plantation or field labourer who is not enslaved, and therefore paid for their labour.

[83] Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Étienne Polverel, *Proclamation, au nom de la République* (Port-au-Prince, J-B Michel Printing House, 1793).

[84] Polverel, 'The Plantation Policies', p. 135.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Ibid.

men and women which had not previously been a part of their lives under slavery. It is worth noting that many of the complaints of female *cultivateurs* had been accompanied by their refusal to work, and threats to leave their plantations. These strikes proved highly effective, and although they were female-led, male *cultivateurs* often participated, which suggests that Polverel's attempt to foster a gender division had not impacted their behaviour.[87] Polverel's application of the European understanding of power differentials between men and women at this point, however, indicates that he was hoping to undermine the co-operation and equality among the *cultivateurs* which united them against the planters. As such, it is clear that the gendered power dynamic accepted in European ideology was not applied to slaves when it might have impacted plantation owners, and in fact they had been to some degree de-gendered, but was imported as soon as it became more convenient for the colonists.

When the National Convention officially upheld the abolition of slavery in 1794, the forced labour laws created by Sonthonax, Polverel, and the other commissioners went into place. In order to maintain the colony's plantation-based agriculture and economy, all slaves were to become *cultivateurs*. As *cultivateurs*, they were expected to work on the same plantation, under the same colonists, doing the same tasks, and although they were supposed to be compensated for their work, wages had not been set, and so they were expected to work for free and then be paid retrospectively once wages had been decided upon.[88] When these rules were read out as a declaration in plantations across Saint-Domingue, there were multiple cases of female *cultivateurs* not believing the authenticity of these regulations, and refusing to obey.[89] Challenging the authority of their prior owners, they said that until French Revolutionary officers came to confirm the declarations, they would not work. Although women led these challenges to the planters' authority, the remaining male *cultivateurs* joined them. The Laborde plantation was one such plantation, and Pierre Duval, a government official, wrote to Polverel asking for help in resolving the matter.[90] The advice he received was to threaten to expel all women refusing to work, reinforcing that this protest was instigated by women, and relying on the women's dependence on the accommodation provided

[87] Kafka, p. 55.

[88] Ibid., p. 51.

[89] Ibid., p. 54.

[90] Ibid., p. 55.

by the plantation, and the community they were a part of with their fellow ex-slaves, to motivate them to acquiesce to the new rules. While these threats succeeded, and work resumed on the Laborde plantation, refusal to work as a form of protest remained a popular method of voicing dissent, and one that was predominantly led by women.

A plantation in Grande Colline had a similar protest, with *cultivateurs* believing that the new regulations were a trick of the colonists, and the plantation owner asking for help, ideally in the form of sending some soldiers to officially confirm the new regulations.[91] There was a case of two women on the Codère plantation who, when told to work into the night by their *conducteur*, not only refused to do the work but also 'said the worst things to the *commandeur*, threatening him'.[92] In fact from as early in the revolution as October 1791, when a local official named Gros was captured, and later wrote that 'the *négresses* were far more rude, harsher, and less willing to return to work than the *négres*', women had been challenging the idea of a return to plantation labour.[93] The confidence which all of these women showed in openly challenging the authority of their male superiors on the plantations, even threatening them, may have been related to their personal and sexual relationships with these men. Moitt argued compellingly that the role of the mistress undercut the power dynamic between enslaved women and colonists, and subsequently female *cultivateurs* and colonists, to such a degree that the women felt empowered to openly challenge them.[94] Regardless of where this confidence came from, it is clear that female *cultivateurs* were instrumental to protesting and resisting workforce exploitation.

Another example of a previously enslaved woman using legal means to challenge her position, and to protect her freedom, is that of Marie-Rose Masson, a *creole* slave who had grown up on the Gallifet plantation. In 1802, wary of a potential re-establishment of slavery, she wrote to the Marquis de Gallifet to appeal to his 'justice and goodness'.[95] While Masson and her mother had both been technically freed in

[91] Ibid., p. 58.

[92] Ibid., p. 60; Lacolle, 'Letter to Polverel on March 20 1794' in eds., Dubois and Garrigus, p. 136.

[93] Gros, *Isle de St. Domingue, Province du Nord, Précis Historique*, trans., my own (Paris: 1793), p. 13: 'les négresses étoient infiniment plus insolentes, plus dures, et moins portées à rentrer dans le devoir que les négres'.

[94] Moitt, p. 245.

[95] Marie-Rose Masson, 'Letter to Marquis de Gallifet, July 27 1802'; in eds., Dubois and Garrigus, p. 175.

1787, various financial delays and the death of the plantation manager had meant that the matter had not been fully resolved before the revolution. As the new plantation manager, Massu, was unaware of the previous agreement, and presumably unwilling to believe Masson, she wrote directly to the Marquis de Gallifet, complaining that Massu was 'exercising an authority over me that is contrary to your justice' and that 'it is therefore necessary that you inform him to let me go once I show him the receipt'.[96] She went on to ask for reassurance 'to assuage my worries', and signed off 'with the respect due to a good former master'.[97] Within this letter, Masson both highlighted the current precarity of her freedom, and simultaneously underlined that the Marquis de Gallifet was and would remain her 'former master'.[98] Referring to the delays in her legal manumission thus far as 'errors', Masson was clearly aware of her legal and legitimate challenge to Massu's orders, and felt comfortable and confident in appealing directly to the plantation owner to rely on his intervention. Her letter implies that she had previously attempted to use the documentation at her disposal to legally stop Massu, but that she had not been taken seriously without the testimonial of the Marquis de Gallifet. This suggests that even when women of colour went through legal and legislative channels to protect their legally mandated rights and freedom, they were still dependent on the men upholding those channels choosing to help or hinder them, still limited by their gender.

Conclusion

Life for the enslaved women of Saint-Domingue was uniquely complicated; they were simultaneously seen as objects of lust, of labour, of maternity, and yet often not recognised as humans. To return to Gaspar and Hine's framework, their 'double burden' was in fact multifold, as they were not only oppressed in a variety of gendered ways on top of the already-hard life of a plantation slave, but they were also granted fewer ways in which they could work themselves towards manumission and freedom. The avenue of manumission most commonly attributed to enslaved women, that of freedom

The term 'creole' is here understood to mean someone born in the Caribbean, often an enslaved person.

[96] Ibid., p. 176.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Ibid.

through marriage, was highly controlled and legislated, on top of being in itself a form of sexual coercion at best. Enslaved women were lauded for their maternal instincts, yet forced to neglect their own children in favour of those of their owners. More than that, they were both praised or punished for their reproductive capabilities and were not allowed a modicum of bodily autonomy. The paths of resistance from both slavery and, with the *Decree of General Liberty*, forced labour, were likewise gendered. Although women of colour did hard manual labour tasks, both as slaves and as *cultivateurs*, they were depicted as weak or frivolous when circumstance benefitted the white colonists to apply these gender roles to them. As such, we can see that despite the dehumanisation of enslaved women, the institution of slavery within the French Caribbean still enforced gender divides throughout the society of slave colonies. Enslaved women may not have been recognised as human, with rights of their own, yet they were still constrained as women, and these constraints remained on women of colour even with emancipation. Confined by their race, regardless of their free status, women of colour's forms of forced labour, the oppression they suffered, and even their methods of resistance to slavery, were all also fundamentally affected by being women.

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