

Racial Mixing and Racial Boundaries in 19th- Century Martinique

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ABSTRACT

Caribbean slave-owning society set the stage for an encounter between colonizing peoples of European descent and African peoples that had been reduced to slavery. That colonial context led to numerous “interracial” sexual relationships. The individuals born of those relations blurred the distinction between the categories of “White” and “Black” that had been constructed in the context of the slave-owning system. Color prejudice, which can be defined as the racialization of legal and social categories, was then used to establish discriminations aimed at free people with enslaved ancestors. That color prejudice did not disappear with the end of slavery. On the contrary, it was reinforced by the fear that “mulattos” inspired in white Creoles (people of European descent born in the Caribbean). Nevertheless, interracial relationships were so anchored in social practices and in profoundly inegalitarian relations of domination that the intensification of racial tensions did not bring them to an end.



This engraving – of a vain man excessively decked out in an outfit that verges on the ridiculous – reflects the image that white Creoles had of “mulattos.” *The Mulatto*, drawing by Pauquet, engraved by Stypulkowski, ca. 1840; engraving from a collection presented by Bertrand Tillier, *The French Portrayed by Themselves*, Paris, Éditions de l’Amateur, 2012, p. 663.

Racial Mixing and Discrimination during Slavery

Slave societies were founded on a novel overlapping of a legal status (free or slave) and a physical characteristic (skin color). So a White person of European lineage would be considered a free individual, whereas a Black person with African origins would be associated with slave status. From the earliest beginnings of colonization, sexual relationships – often coerced – between white male slave-owners and black slave women, which were all the more frequent due to the small number of white women present in the Caribbean, challenged those legal distinctions.

The relations generally took place outside of the institution of marriage and led to the birth of “mulattos,” a term that emphasized the offspring’s difference in legal status and skin tone from their parents. Many children who were born slaves were freed by their fathers, who were also their mothers’ owners. That practice led to the birth of a new class, “Free People of Color,” which blurred racial borders by encompassing both mixed-race people born of an interracial relationship between a White man and a Black woman, and freed slaves with African roots. Still, “Free People of Color” status was devised for the sake of marking out individuals with slave backgrounds within a single legal category (free people).

In his observations of French Dominican society in the late 18th century, Moreau de Saint-Méry (a colonist from Martinique) established an uncrossable color line between Whites and Blacks. According to him, the “stain of slavery” on those who had “colored” ancestors constituted an indelible mark that prevented free people of color,

mixed-race people or their descendants from integrating the group of “Whites,” even over the course of generations. “Mulattos” were the target of disapproval and disdain from the white population, which clung to all sorts of prejudiced clichés about them: “mulattos” were thought of as “lazy,” “vain” creatures who were “greedy for honors.”

In places with slavery, Free People of Color did not have the same civil rights that were enjoyed by white people.

The French Revolution and the first half of the 19th century were marked by the struggle of Free People of Color for civil and legal equality with white people. That struggle finally bore some, albeit incomplete, fruit in 1833, when the Colonial Charter established identical civil rights for Whites and Free People of Color. At the same time, it imposed an extremely high electoral tax, which de facto kept almost all Free People of Color from voting.

In 1848, the abolition of slavery in France and its colonies made the discriminations against Free People, whether white or of color, obsolete. The abolitionist Victor Schoelcher hoped that socio-racial distinctions would then begin to fade away. In fact, the exact opposite occurred.

The Great Fear of Replacement after 1848

The legal category of Free People of Color was immediately replaced by the term “mulattos,” the better to distinguish them from white people, who had always been free, and black “farmhands” (the term replaced “slave”), who were freed in 1848. In the middle of the century, there were far more “mulattos” than white people in Martinique and Guadeloupe.

That very heterogenous, intermediary category was composed mostly of craftspeople, household servants, shopkeepers and planters, as well as an educated elite that gradually entered the learned professions. The Second French Republic and universal suffrage for men meant that they could hold political office at both the national and municipal level. “Mulattos” entry into political life struck fear in white Creoles’ hearts, a fear that is clear in many texts. The concept of “replacement” suddenly appears in the correspondence of some white Creoles. A landowner named Thoré, for instance, wrote to Auguste Pécoul on 24 September 1848 to denounce the fact that men “of color” could now be elected to political office, or be hired for positions in the colonial administration that used to be reserved for white Creoles.

The figure of the “mulatto” was seen as dangerous by white Creoles because it subverted the social and racial order, and challenged France’s colonial domination in the West Indies. If the writings of white Creoles were to be believed, “colored” domination would soon be replacing white domination, the only way to maintain a French colonial presence. Through that idea of replacement, the specter of a revolution, like the slave rebellion in French Saint-Domingue in 1791, raised its head once again. By abolishing both universal suffrage and freedom of the press, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte’s coup d’état of 1851 put a temporary end to white Creoles’ fear, but the advent of the Third Republic revived racial tensions. Once it was re-established in the “old colonies,” the republican (anti-monarchist) ideal based on universal suffrage, struck a deep chord within the “mulatto” class. The social and economic competition between “mulattos” and white Creoles grew more intense as some white families’ wealth and status declined. The replacement theme grew stronger once again as “mulattos” demands increased, both in the public arena and in the press. In that context, strengthening the racial barrier was at the heart of white Creoles’ struggle to maintain their social domination.

Interracial Relationships: Relations of Domination and Racial Mixing

The exacerbation of racial tensions did not put an end to interracial relationships. In the eyes of most white Creole men, black or mixed-race women were seen as more desirable than white women. In addition, white Creole men enjoyed tremendous sexual freedom. It was both common and socially acceptable to choose a mistress from among the household servants or plantation workers, or a kept woman in town. Those practices remained

customary at least until the early 20th century. The sexual relations were often coerced: the lack of privacy and close quarters on plantations were conducive to sexual harassment and rape. The “mulatto” children born of those relationships, whether consensual or coerced, were rarely acknowledged by the paternal line. Nevertheless, some of them worked on the plantation and were integrated into the white masters’ daily lives to a certain extent. Their kinship might be recognized tacitly, or, on the contrary, lead to conflictual relationships. White Creole women were raised to respect the color barrier much more strictly, however, so that they would maintain the “racial purity” of the family’s lineage, and they tended to judge interracial relationships far more harshly.

So white Creole society’s gaze saw “mulattos” differently depending on their gender: while “mulatto” men tended to be seen as a threat, to white Creole men, “mulatto” women were the subject of representations that reduced them to the role of potential sexual partners. So as long as it occurred within the framework of race, class and gender hierarchies, racial mixing did not constitute a transgression of colonial order.

Interracial relationships and the racial mixing they produced were rooted in profoundly inegalitarian power relationships founded on a triple domination: social, racial and by gender. In post-slavery society, they contributed to perpetuating racial prejudice more than to reducing it.

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