

# *The* LIBERTINE COLONY

Creolization in the Early French Caribbean \* DORIS GARRAWAY



*The Libertine Colony*

A JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN CENTER BOOK



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**Creolization in the Early French Caribbean**

*Doris Garraway*

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Durham and London 2005*

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Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper ☺  
Designed by Amy Ruth Buchanan  
Typeset in Adobe Caslon by  
Tseng Information Systems, Inc.  
Library of Congress Cataloging-  
in-Publication Data appear on the  
last printed page of this book.

*In loving memory of*  
*Michael O. Garraway*  
*and Paolo Palezzato*



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## Preface

At the time I began this project, the bicentennial anniversary of the Haitian Revolution had reminded the world of the “horrors of Saint-Domingue,” the most brutal slave colony in history, out of which arose the most radical liberation movement of the so-called “Age of Revolutions.” Still, little scholarly attention had been devoted to the cultures of slavery of Old Regime France and, in particular, the texts and literary representations produced about them. While this may not seem surprising, given the historic suppression of colonialism and slavery in Western historiography and humanistic disciplines, more remarkable was that a certain silence around colonial slavery persisted in the very subdiscipline whose mission it was to promote the study of colonial legacies and non-European traditions in the humanities—postcolonial studies. Equally striking to me was that the burgeoning subfield of francophone Caribbean studies demonstrated considerable disregard for early colonial narratives and cultural history, despite the critical interest of literary specialists in theories of creolization that describe the emergence of syncretic cultural forms on the plantation. I soon discovered, however, that there were important reasons for these silences. For a literary scholar, it is immediately far more gratifying to read novels of slavery and colonialism written by postcolonial writers committed to reimagining the subversiveness, resistance, and intelligence of captive peoples than to confront the missionary relations, colonial histories, legal codes, travel literature, novels, and political treatises that represent the same people in quite different terms. At the same time, few of the categories and concepts current in postcolonial studies are useful in a discussion of the Old Regime cultures

of slavery in which the “other” was not native and there was so little ambivalence involved in the process of commodifying the human individual.

As I read on, however, I became convinced that these reasons were not sufficient cause to leave the serious study of French writing on the Caribbean to other disciplines. I felt that, not only were these neglected colonial texts fascinating in their own right, but that a literary analysis of them would have profound implications for some of the most difficult and contentious issues in Caribbean studies, while at the same time opening up new perspectives on modern francophone Caribbean literature and on early modern French literature and popular culture. In working with this corpus, the issues that concerned me were not limited to the rhetorical and ideological characteristics of the texts themselves or the ways in which they portrayed the power relation between the colony and the metropole. I also sought to identify which stories the published narrative record told or suppressed about the cultural, social, and sexual dynamics of colonialism and slavery in French territories, and the ways in which these dynamics changed over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That broad focus required a reconsideration of the object of literary analysis and the limits and possibilities of textual critique in a historical frame. In my view, the particular contribution of literary criticism to the study of cultures lies in its ability to go where historians often do not tread; on the basis of a close reading of a particular text, image, or anecdote, to imagine, as Joan Dayan has put it, what cannot be verified; to posit what could never have been documented in any historical archive; to recover the fantasies, beliefs, mentalities, and silences in which the desires and anxieties of historical subjects may be lodged; to consider, furthermore, the ways in which a text’s form and structure provide as much insight into the cultural conditions of its production as the manifest narrative it contains. In addition to supplementing and in some cases questioning dominant historical and anthropological understandings of early French Caribbean cultures, I therefore endeavored to produce a study of the first French colonial literature from the Caribbean region.

This book thus represents a historically situated literary interpretation of selected texts that provide insights into the process whereby radically different ethnic and national groups were coerced into coexistence and structured in social relations of domination based on race. In particular, my analyses shed light on the relationship between the cultural transformation and hybridization of transplanted populations and the emergence of borders of violence between them. In contrast to theorists of creolization who celebrate

the cultural and biological synthesis of different groups without examining the violent antagonisms across which such processes were negotiated, I seek to understand how the violence and desires enacted by the settler minority were instrumental in shaping Creole cultural forms, colonial racial ideologies, and the legal means by which the white elite established its hegemony in the Old Regime Caribbean.

Central to my inquiry is the concept of libertinage, through which writers continually defined the Caribbean as a space of spiritual, social, and moral deviance. While tracing this critique in accounts of cross-cultural encounters, piracy, colonial domesticity, occult practices and beliefs, slavery, and miscegenation written by representatives of the colonizing culture, I intervene in a number of debates about the cultural workings of colonialism and slavery in the Americas. These debates pertain to the representational value of European ethnographic accounts of Amerindian peoples, the social and cultural meanings of piratical violence and plantation agriculture, the relation between missionary ideology and the law of slavery, and the creolization of spirit beliefs. Most importantly, I ask how the concept of colonial libertinage might be expanded and redeployed to describe the impact of gender and sexuality on white elite racial discourses, political identity, and social practices in French Caribbean slave societies. My study of the narrative sources convinced me of the centrality of desire and sexuality to ideologies of racial domination espoused by members of the white elite over the course of the eighteenth century, ideologies which had their corollary in scenes of subjection and legal regimes of exclusion directed against free nonwhites. To illustrate this proposition, I develop an alternative understanding of libertinage as a sexual economy that undergirded exploitative power relations among whites, free people of color, and slaves. Drawing on literary and psychoanalytic criticism, historical research, and my own textual analyses, my theory of a “libertine colony” posits a relationship between white elite sexual engagements (coerced and consensual) with nonwhite women, slave and free, and the extreme segregationist regime that reached its apogee in the exceptionally brutal slave society of late-eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue.

Based on an analysis of legal and narrative discourses, I argue that, over time, elite white colonials imagined their relation to free nonwhites and slaves through a metaphor of illegitimate filiation. While rooted in the knowledge of the sexual relations that linked individuals across ethno-social groupings in the slave colony, this image offered the white elite a means of repressing its involvement in interracial libertinage by projecting the bur-

den of culpability and punishment onto both slave women and the growing class of free people of color, deemed the immoral carriers of a primal sin. Racially discriminatory legislation therefore became the primary mechanism by which the white elite attempted to control, manage, and suppress the social and economic consequences of interracial sexual relations. The ironic effect of such discrimination was to discipline indirectly white libertinage, while at the same time leaving elite men free to pursue their interracial desires with impunity, thus reinforcing white sexual hegemony in the colony. Close analysis of the fantasies inherent in narratives of race and reproduction produced in the libertine colony demonstrates, furthermore, the fundamentally incestuous structure of white colonial desire, a structure that arguably manifested itself on the plantation and in the discursive and legal persecution of free people of color in Saint-Domingue. The “libertine colony” thesis thus offers a means of understanding the centrality of desire and sexuality to notions of white Creole identity and political legitimacy in Saint-Domingue, as well as the concrete effects of such desires; in particular, their role in creating precisely those segregationist measures that were intended to erect an untransgressible social barrier between whites, free nonwhites, and slaves in Saint-Domingue.

\* \* \*

This book began as a doctoral thesis at Duke University, and I am deeply grateful to my advisors, Philip Stewart and Michèle Longino, for allowing me the freedom to pursue research that challenged and expanded the categories of early modern French and francophone Caribbean literature in often unpredictable ways. I am also grateful to Walter Mignolo, Sibylle Fischer, Jean Jonassaint, Toril Moi, and Nicole Jacques-Chaquin for the suggestions, criticisms, and encouragement they offered in the early stages of the project’s development.

At Northwestern University the project grew and matured, and I owe a considerable debt to the people who have nurtured that growth. In the Department of French and Italian, I would like to thank Bernadette Fort, Jane Winston, Sylvie Romanowski, Jean Mainil, and Scott Durham for their valuable feedback on various portions of the manuscript. Michal Ginsburg and Bill Paden provided critical professional support and guidance during their successive tenures as department chair. I would also like to thank those historians at Northwestern who have been enthusiastic interlocutors on the subjects of my research. Tessie Liu, Sarah Maza, Peter Carroll, Stephanie McCurry, and Martha Biondi commented on various chapter drafts. I am

grateful to Mary Weismantel and Jorge Coronado for sharing their expertise on anthropological theory and colonial Latin American studies, respectively. I would also like to acknowledge the students in my courses at Northwestern who have been patient and engaged discussants of some of the topics presented in this book.

Numerous individuals beyond Northwestern have offered the intellectual companionship and moral support without which this project would not have been possible. I am especially grateful to Joan Dayan for the inspiration, expertise, and encouragement she has offered since I first discovered her spellbinding scholarship on Saint-Domingue and Haiti. Many thanks are also due to Carina Johnson, Carroll Smith Rosenberg, Tim Reiss, Srinivas Aravamudan, Arlene Keizer, and Stephanie Camp for commenting on chapter drafts. Over the past several years I have had various opportunities to present my work in progress in the form of lectures, workshops, and conference papers. I would like to thank Carroll Smith Rosenberg, Christine Clark-Evans, Downing Thomas, Michèle Longino, Jerome Branche, Elizabeth Monasterios, Françoise Lionnet, Philip Stewart, Byron Wells, and Peter Reiss for inviting me to their events. I am also grateful to the two anonymous readers from Duke University Press for their comments on and enthusiasm for the manuscript; to my copy editor Janet Opdyke for her able assistance; and to Ken Wissoker for believing in the project. My editor Mark Mastromarino expertly ushered the manuscript through production. For help with some translations in chapters 1 and 2, I thank Brad Reichek and Fran Hutchins, and for assistance with the index, Nancy Zibman.

Research for this book could not have been completed without the financial assistance I have received from several sources. Initial research in France was supported by grants from Duke University's Center for European Studies and Department of Romance Studies, and the Ford Foundation. I am especially grateful to the Alice Berline Kaplan Center for the Humanities at Northwestern University for awarding me a fellowship in 2002–03, which provided me the time necessary to expand my research and write most of the final manuscript. I also thank the staff of Northwestern's Interlibrary Loan Service, the McCormick Library of Special Collections, and the Newberry Library for their research assistance. An earlier version of the first half of chapter 3 appeared as "Material Bodies, Spiritual Worlds: Ideologies of the Occult and Regimes of Discipline in the Colonial French Caribbean," in *Interpreting Colonialism*, edited by Byron R. Wells and Philip Stewart, a special issue of *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 2004, no. 9: 260–83; and a segment of chapter 5, entitled "Race,



Reproduction and Family Romance in Moreau de Saint-Méry's *Description . . . de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue*," was published in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38.2 (2005): 227–46. I thank the publishers of these journals for their permission to reuse this material. All translations from texts in French are mine unless otherwise indicated. With the exception of citations to modern editions, I have retained the original spellings of titles of primary sources.

Finally, I owe an incalculable debt to the family members and loved ones who have expressed unwavering confidence in me and interest in my work. My deepest gratitude goes to Annie Marie Garraway, Levi Alexander Garraway, and Isla Garraway Shavelle for giving me strength and courage. I am also very thankful for the steady and enthusiastic support offered by Mamadou Bâ. Most of all, I would like to acknowledge the two people in my life who most motivated and encouraged my endeavors in this project, but who, tragically, did not live to see its final form. This book is dedicated to the memory of my father, Michael Oliver Garraway, who first inspired and will forever remain present in my words, my thoughts, and my imagination. It is also dedicated to the memory of Paolo Palezzato, who for years listened to and supported my thinking on every subject treated here, and who taught me the meaning of intellectual honesty, ethical conviction, and love.

## **Introduction**    *Creolization in the Old Regime*

**T**his is a study of published narrative sources from the French Caribbean from the inception of colonization in the 1640s until the onset of the Haitian Revolution in the 1790s. My goal in reading these sources is to contribute to the study of cultural contact, exchange, and social transformation, which resulted in the rise of one of the most profitable yet brutal slave societies in history. I believe that literary criticism and theoretical interpretive methodologies offer crucial insights into some of the most fascinating yet elusive questions encountered by writers and scholars on the historical Caribbean. How are cultural traits and belief systems shared between individuals and groups in social relations of domination? What are the relationships between cultural interaction and boundary crossing, on one hand, and the construction and maintenance of repressive regimes enforced by exclusions and violence, on the other? Alternatively, at what point do exchanges, desires, and intimacies across the boundary of power subvert regimes of violence and at what point do they encourage, reinforce, or even produce them? In posing these questions, I focus on a productive paradox in recent theories of creolization, namely, the notion that a common culture may be constructed in a social system marked by asymmetrical power relations and the threat of violence. By attending to the power dynamics governing the development of Creole societies, I examine the ways in which social conflicts inherent in slavery and a racialized social structure impacted processes of cultural syncretism. Most importantly, I call attention to what has often been masked or misapprehended in discussions of both creolization and colonial slavery: the role of desire and sexuality alongside violence

in shaping Creole society. Far from being mitigating factors in structures of oppression, desire and sexuality contributed in fundamental ways to practices and ideologies of domination in the colonial French Caribbean.

Descriptive writings on the Old Regime French Caribbean were first published soon after the creation of the second state-sponsored trading company in 1635 and continued until the fall of French Saint-Domingue in the late 1790s. Throughout this time span, colonial narratives changed significantly in subject matter, authorship, and ideological orientation. From this corpus, I have made selections based on the ethnographic interest of texts and their reception and influence. These include missionary histories and relations written to provide superiors, donors, the company administration, and the French reading public with information on the colonies. In the seventeenth century, missionaries Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre, Raymond Breton, Jean-Baptiste Labat, and a score of minor writers documented the history, customs, and morals of the three main population groups in the colonies: Island Caribs, French settlers, and captive Africans. In the same time period, there appeared what I call narratives of adventure and transgression. Writers such as the pirate Alexandre Oexmelin and the libertine Pierre-Corneille Blessebois operated outside the official civil and religious power structure and offered a more satirical and sensational portrait of the colonies as a space of piracy, violence, libertinage, and creolized spirit beliefs. In the eighteenth century, a number of travel narratives were influenced by the new Enlightenment philosophy. Works by Baron Wimpffen and Girod de Chantrans, for example, provided documentary information mixed with scathing criticisms of colonial slave societies, which they viewed as moral and economic dystopias. Yet concomitant with the escalation of colonial wealth and the slave trade the eighteenth century saw the publication of numerous procolonial descriptions and treatises on slavery and administration, including works by Hiliard d'Auberteuil, Moreau de Saint-Méry, and Émilien Petit. These texts offer valuable insight into the dynamics and mentalities of colonial slavery and the consolidation of white racial hegemony in the French Caribbean. While most of these narratives are nonfictional, my corpus also includes the first colonial novel written in French, *Le Zombi du Grand-Pérou*, published in 1696 by Blessebois. In addition, I analyze the earliest linguistic description of the Carib language, Raymond Breton's encyclopedic bilingual dictionary of 1665. Throughout the study, I examine the Code noir and other laws that codified slavery and racialized power relations. In particular, legal discourses on miscegenation and racial discrimination indicate the extent to which the products of cul-

tural exchange and race mixture were subject to legal control by colonial authorities.

Part of the intent of the project is to provide historically contextualized interpretations of many little-known works on the Old Regime Caribbean colonies. It must be said, however, that to read these texts is to enter into a corpus and a world largely disavowed, forgotten, or silenced by scholars and readers in France and the French Caribbean. For Édouard Glissant, the roots of this forgetting in his native Martinique are deep and reflect the ideological conditioning of the metropole, under whose influence the Caribbean people live, he argues, in a collective amnesia regarding their ancestral bondage and their material conditions of dependency in the present.<sup>1</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot attributes what he calls the “silencing” of French colonial slavery to French historiography’s continuous evasion of colonialism in the Old Regime, as well as its suppression of the revolution that almost ended slavery in all French territories and inexorably changed the course of French colonialism.<sup>2</sup> For Louis Sala-Molins, the history of denial began with the Enlightenment avoidance of colonial slavery, and it has continued to this day, to judge from state commemorations of the bicentennial of the French Revolution, where, as Sala-Molins points out, little mention was made of colonial slavery, the Haitian Revolution, or the momentary abolition of slavery brought by the National Convention in 1794.<sup>3</sup> An examination of the circumstances and progressive enactment of this forgetting—what I call historical abjection—will suggest both the challenges and the urgency of rereading Old Regime colonial narratives.

### *On Memory and Forgetting*

By the time Jacques Bouton published the first missionary relation from the Caribbean colonies in 1640, French readers had developed a distinct taste for travel literature from the Americas.<sup>4</sup> French writings largely followed the tradition of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century narratives from colonial Spanish America and New France, whose pages were rich with natural historical and ethnographic information. Works by Lopez de Gómara, Garcilaso de la Vega, and Bartolomé de Las Casas went through numerous French editions from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth.<sup>5</sup> Among the best-known early French publications on the New World are those documenting the establishment of colonies in South America, such as André Thevet’s *Les Singularitez de la France Antarctique* (1557) and Jean de Léry’s more polemical *Histoire d’un voyage fait en terre du Brésil* (1578). When French attempts

to settle the Brazilian littoral and other points along the Atlantic coast faltered, Canada emerged as the center of French colonial activity in the seventeenth century, as evidenced by the published works of Cartier, Champlain, Lescarbot, and the priest Gabriel Sagard.<sup>6</sup> In the following century, however, Canada was overtaken in geopolitical importance by the Antilles, a fact that is reflected in the number of published works on the island colonies. Whereas in the seventeenth century the total number of books on the French Caribbean did not exceed several dozen, this number increased to over three hundred in the eighteenth century, thus signaling the new centrality of the Caribbean to the Old Regime colonial empire.<sup>7</sup>

The fact that few of these works were popular successes in France is due in large part to the late date at which colonial slavery became a topic of interest for metropolitan readers and writers. For much of the eighteenth century, the fiction of American exoticism was concerned with pastoral utopian settings or representations of idyllic natives, *not* slavery.<sup>8</sup> Some Caribbean texts were popularized through multivolume compilations such as Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* (1749–67), Prévost's *Histoire des voyages* (1746–59) and the *Encyclopédie* (1751–65), and they influenced the anthropological thinking of Enlightenment philosophes such as Rousseau.<sup>9</sup> Yet colonial slavery had little impact on French literature until the mid-eighteenth century, with the publication of Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit des lois* (1748), which contained a satirical critique of contemporary rationales for the slave trade, and Pierre Antoine de Laplace's enormously successful theatrical adaptation of the English writer Aphra Behn's antislavery novel, *Oroonoko* (1688), published in 1745. Behn's novel was one of the nine most frequently read English novels in France at midcentury, and it went through seven editions by 1800.<sup>10</sup> In the second half of the eighteenth century, the colonies were at the center of growing debates about the economic viability of slave labor, humanitarian objections to the slave system, the feasibility of monopolistic trade restrictions, and the significance of American expansion for the well-being of Europe. Hence we find some antislavery sentiment in the writings of such Enlightenment luminaries as Condorcet, Raynal, Diderot, Montesquieu, Mirabeau, and Prévost. The plight of heroic slaves was imagined in poetry, plays, novels, and the genre of harangue, or prosopopoeia, in which black characters, most often men, were fictively ventriloquized by European sympathizers. These appeared most notably in Prévost's *Le pour et contre* (1735), in the novel *Ziméo* (1773) by the minor philosophe Jean-François de Saint-Lambert, and most importantly in Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes* (1770, 1774, 1780), the third edition of which was secretly edited by Diderot,

who inserted numerous inflammatory passages critical of colonial slavery. With its detailed historical descriptions of the Caribbean colonies, notably Saint-Domingue, this work constituted the most radical critique of colonialism to emerge from Enlightenment France.<sup>11</sup> Finally, physiocratic inquiry into the issue of slavery appeared in political and economic tracts and philosophical forums such as the physiocratic journal *Ephémérides du citoyen*, founded in 1765 by the Abbé Baudeau and edited by Du Pont de Nemours.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, even as French metropolitan writers engaged with the issue of colonial slavery, they arguably repressed the specifics of France's own interests in and practice of it in the Caribbean colonies. Much of the so-called anti-slavery literature was situated not in the French Caribbean but in Surinam (Voltaire, *Candide*; Laplace, *Oronoko*), Spanish America (Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*), and Jamaica (Saint-Lambert, *Ziméo*; Prévost, *Le pour et contre*).<sup>13</sup> In an astute critique of the eighteenth-century literary obsession with an eroticized Orient, Madeleine Dobie rightly maintains that French writers masked the magnitude of French interests in slavery in its own Atlantic colonies by transposing the problem of slavery to the oriental context.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, as many have argued, philosophical contestations of slavery and the colonial system usually led to reformist arguments or contradictory positions rather than endorsements of actual abolition.<sup>15</sup> Beneath the rhetoric lay the assumption that slavery could not be immediately discarded and that colonial commerce and industry had nonetheless contributed to the benefit of mankind. Thus, in Condorcet's *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres*, written under the pseudonym "Schwartz," the author advocated a complicated scheme of gradual abolition so as to "train" slaves for freedom.<sup>16</sup> And, while Raynal is often heralded as an antislavery hero, his famous *Histoire des deux Indes* was followed in 1785 with the *Essai sur l'administration de St.-Domingue*,<sup>17</sup> in which he defended slavery on the basis of the legendary argument that enslaved Africans were better off living in a progressive civilization.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the most famous example of flawed anti-slavery concerns the revolutionary organization La Société des Amis des Noirs, founded in 1787 by Brissot. Condorcet served as president, and its members, drawn from the social elite, included Lafayette, Volney, Mirabeau, and Abbé Grégoire. The society publicized abuses of the slave trade and advocated its abolition. It did not, however, advocate the immediate emancipation of the slaves. Likewise, its support for ending the slave trade was premised on an imperialist program of European expansion into Africa whereby Africans would be made to work for Europeans on their own soil. During the revolutions in France and Saint-Domingue, members of the

society fought for mulatto rights to the detriment of the cause of freedom for slaves, and by the time the National Convention passed the abolition decree of 1794 the society had almost completely disbanded and none of its members had taken an active role.<sup>19</sup>

The repression of colonial slavery and its narrative corpus only increased after the Haitian Revolution, though within a new geopolitical landscape. Whereas French Enlightenment antislavery proved inadequate to the cause of emancipation, nineteenth-century political upheavals resulted in the re-establishment of slavery and the Code noir, followed by a legislative act of abolition by the provisional government of the Second Republic in 1848. The loss of Saint-Domingue and the massacre by former slaves of the remaining white French residents in 1804 greatly undermined abolitionist fervor while reducing France's interest in and dependence on slavery and the slave trade, as French imperial power turned its attention to Egypt, Algeria, and sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>20</sup> The 1848 act of abolition and its accompanying ideological discourse of republicanism signaled the official disavowal of slavery. The proclamation by the French commissioner Louis Thomas Husson to Martinican slaves in 1848 cast the abolition as the good news of an enlightened republic free from monarchical despotism in all its guises.<sup>21</sup> Official French history of slave emancipation in French territories has since championed the antislavery activist Victor Schoelcher and the Second Republic as its heroes and reinvented the Enlightenment as the source of revolutionary values driving republican abolitionism.<sup>22</sup> According to this narrative, the abolition of slavery represented the achievement of the liberal ideals of the philosophes and a definitive break with the past crimes of an unenlightened, despotic monarchy. Slavery became, in the words of Françoise Vergès, the "*secret de famille*" that was repressed "for the sake of reconciliation."<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, by forgetting slavery France proclaimed itself the harbinger of the Enlightenment values that could "civilize" Africans on their own soil, thus laying the ideological groundwork for nineteenth-century imperialist expansion.<sup>24</sup>

This suppression of Old Regime colonialism and slavery is nonetheless surprising given the enormous economic significance of the Antilles for France. In terms of material rewards, the Caribbean plantation system represented by far the most successful colonial venture of the Old Regime. Yet it was founded on what was by far the most brutal experiment in social engineering and physical repression ever engaged in by France. The initial consolidation of the territory required decades of territorial warfare with the islands' indigenous inhabitants, the Caribs. From 1626 to 1664,

the islands of Saint-Christophe, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and the western half of Hispaniola (later known as Saint-Domingue), as well as several adjoining islands and their dependencies, all came under French rule. Following the initiative of the privateering explorers Pierre d'Esnameuc and Urbain de Roissey, Richelieu backed the creation of the first colonies, which were first administered through successive incarnations of the trading company established for that purpose. In 1674, the company was definitively liquidated and the colonies were brought under direct royal rule as provinces of France itself. Settled by impoverished noblemen, traders, missionaries, farmers, bondsmen, vagabonds, women, and, most importantly, captive Africans and their descendants, the islands grew into profitable plantation enclaves producing large quantities of tobacco and sugar by the latter part of the seventeenth century. Channeled back to France according to a monopolistic policy that later became known as the *Exclusif*, these products and the ensuing trade in humans mapped out a triangular shipping route between Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean. France's monopolistic colonial policies were perfected under Richelieu's renowned successor and the minister of the royal navy, Colbert. He regarded the development of overseas trade as the most important foundation for the regeneration of French commerce, the navy, and the merchant marine.<sup>25</sup>

All kinds of domestic French industries grew rich supplying the colonies and slave trade, including textiles, distilleries, manufactures, and shipbuilding. This industrial clamor contributed greatly to the growth of the merchant and marine bourgeoisie, first in Norman and Breton ports such as Le Havre, Dieppe, Nantes, Rochefort, and Saint-Malo. In the late seventeenth century, as the northern ports were increasingly tied up in wartime naval activities with England, the southern cities of La Rochelle, Bordeaux, and Marseilles benefited from colonial trade. Even more remarkable, however, was the productivity of the island colonies themselves, as they were able to supply both the French and European demand for tropical commodities. Though small in territory, the Caribbean colonies far exceeded French possessions in North America in their capacity to generate wealth using slave labor. As early as 1685, the French Antilles ranked second in world sugar production. War would hardly break this trend. Several international conflicts raged in the Caribbean seas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, involving England, France, Spain, and Holland. When in 1763 the Treaty of Paris was signed ending the Seven Years' War, Great Britain claimed Canada from France but returned Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Saint-Domingue to France. Western Louisiana had been sold in 1762 to the



king of Spain, an ally in the conflict. Despite this seemingly disproportionate loss of land, Choiseul, the French foreign minister, deemed the treaty a victory in that it secured the most profitable colonial domains, the key to further colonial expansion. In the eighteenth century, the Caribbean islands were the most prized colonial possessions in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>26</sup>

By 1789, the runaway success of the French Caribbean colonies had reached its outer limit. The single island of Saint-Domingue was the world's largest producer of sugar and was considered by some the most valuable province of France. Likewise, this island dominates the historical imagination of eighteenth-century French colonialism, for it best encapsulates the horrific contradictions plaguing the Old Regime's colonial project. The colony originated on the small island of Tortuga off the northwestern coast as a loose settlement of pirates, buccaneers, and vagabonds, who for many years resisted the imposition of colonial authority. Only in 1697 did the Treaty of Ryswick officially annex the western side of the island to the French state. Yet, although the island was a latecomer to the plantation sugar economy already established in Martinique and Guadeloupe, Saint-Domingue's explosive growth during the first three decades of the eighteenth century led France to assume a dominant position in the world's sugar market. Between 1686 and 1720, the population of slaves in the Lesser Antilles quadrupled, while in Saint-Domingue their numbers increased fourteen times.<sup>27</sup> By midcentury, the single island of Saint-Domingue was producing more sugar for France than all of the British islands did for England.<sup>28</sup> Despite international tensions in the region, sugar production continued to escalate due to the obsessive reliance on slave laborers brought into the colony by the thousands and the development of irrigation technologies that allowed arid plains to be made over into new plantations. Added to this was a boom in coffee production after 1760. This new source of profitability, met largely by the class of free people of color in Saint-Domingue, was responsible for the agricultural development of the mountains.<sup>29</sup> Thus, at the close of the eighteenth century Saint-Domingue was indisputably the richest colony in the world, providing France with untold wealth from imported and reexported colonial goods.<sup>30</sup>

In 1792, the colonial lobby of the National Assembly maintained that prior to the revolution over 40 percent of French commerce with foreign powers derived from reexported colonial goods. This colonial system in turn supplied labor to six million French people throughout the kingdom.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, however, the system that supported the French labor market literally consumed hundreds of thousands of captive Africans and their

descendants. They were brought to the colonies in such escalating numbers that in the last decade of French colonial rule in Saint-Domingue the proportion of slaves to colonists was greater than ten to one. Modern population figures on this period put the total population of the colony at approximately 500,000 persons: 30,000 whites, an equal number of free non-whites, and over 400,000 slaves.<sup>32</sup> In the last two decades of French rule, the slave population increased twofold due to an escalation in slave trade activity, not natural reproduction. Thus, an extraordinarily brutal form of slavery underwrote French commercial success in the eighteenth century at the very moment when the philosophes were proclaiming the rights of man. Their so-called antislavery writings did precious little for the people who were sacrificed to the colonial system.

Still, the predominant view of the French Enlightenment was long purified of its imperial sympathies and complicities. The Age of Enlightenment has been upheld in French culture as progressive, antislavery, cultural relativist, and even primitivist with regard to writings by luminaries such as Rousseau, Diderot, Raynal, Voltaire, and Montesquieu.<sup>33</sup> It is no wonder that, at the end of the nineteenth century, the first historian of the social aspects of colonial slavery, Lucien Peytraud, lamented that historical scholarship had thus far favored the achievement of French abolition over the discussion of slaves in history.<sup>34</sup> Breaking with the tradition of studying only the military, political, or economic dimensions of colonialism, Peytraud and Pierre de Vaissière were the first historians to make use of narrative sources from the Old Regime colonies, while Jacques de Dampierre compiled the first critical study of published sources on the Antilles.<sup>35</sup> Yet, whereas historians regarded this material as a vital source of information about slavery as a social system, scholars of French literature have shown considerably less interest in these texts. Since the appearance in 1931 of Gilbert Chinard's in-depth study of several colonial narratives in relation to what he called the "American imaginary" of French literature, most literary research on French colonialism, slavery, antislavery discourse, or early anthropology has concerned metropolitan French literary, scientific, or philosophical texts, thus leaving the narratives of Caribbean colonialism largely unexamined.

By contrast, it is in the study of the French Caribbean itself that early modern colonial writings have been explored more deeply, a fact that points to the importance of the politics of location in the remembrance of colonial legacies. Understandably, however, literary historians of the region have registered uncertainty about how to place colonial writings in relation to the oppositional poetics of Caribbean writers of color, who championed the

end of racism and colonial domination. If we consider two literary histories, *La Transgression des couleurs* by Roger Toumson and *Les Écrivains français et les Antilles* by Régis Antoine, the methodological difficulty becomes obvious. As Toumson's title suggests, he conceives the identifying feature of the history of francophone Caribbean literature as the subversive emergence of Afro-Caribbean contestations of colonialist literary forms, tropes, and ideologies. Toumson thus identifies Caribbean literary traditions in terms of a racial binary—"la littérature blanche et la littérature nègre"—seen to inherit the vision of the world of the colonizer and colonized, respectively.<sup>36</sup> Antoine, on the other hand, distances himself from the formative phase of Afro-Caribbean literary consciousness by choosing as an endpoint to his study the year 1932, the date of the appearance of the periodicals *L'Étudiant Noir* and *Légitime Défense*. His title—*Les Écrivains français et les Antilles: Des premiers Pères blancs aux surréalistes noirs*—suggests that he considers both white and black writers to be "French," even as he maintains a distinction between the French national identity and the islands themselves. In his preface, the author avoids the tensions among race, place, and national identification by conflating the French nationality with the use of the French language: "We therefore took into consideration all the French literary texts . . . that speak of the Antilles."<sup>37</sup> Yet the very scope of the work represents a certain drawback from the perspective of this study, for the literary historical approach limits the degree to which, through the work of interpretation, the author may contribute to or challenge dominant understandings of the historical, social, and cultural phenomena treated by these texts. In contrast, Joan Dayan's *Haiti, History, and the Gods* demonstrates the advantages of abandoning strict disciplinary methodologies in examining colonial writings.<sup>38</sup> Through the critical practice she calls "literary fieldwork," Dayan engages the literary and spiritual archive of French colonialism in late Saint-Domingue as well as that of nineteenth-century Haiti, thus offering a penetrating interpretation of the culture, history, and memory of the island nation as it has been constructed both within Haiti and by outside observers.

### *Toward a Historicist Literary Interpretation*

My interest in this corpus of forgotten narratives from the early French Caribbean is compelled in part by the move in postcolonial studies to reread the narrative archive of colonialism for evidence of the ways in which European accounts of the non-European world enabled the progressive deploy-

ment of colonial and imperial power. Yet my approach and objectives differ substantially from that project. Dissenting from what have become conventional and often limiting orthodoxies about the relation between discourse and colonial power, I maintain that the mere deconstruction of colonialist categories, stereotypes, and ideologies only further centers the history of Western imperialism and confines the scholar to a critique of representation that presumes the hegemony it seeks to expose. Instead I believe that any critique of colonial texts has inescapable ramifications for the ways in which both scholars and living communities understand and create new narratives about the past, understandings that are not limited to the abstract structures of colonial domination but include the formation of cultures and societies. This is especially true in cases such as the Caribbean, where, as Peter Hulme has noted, the only remaining evidence of the past is often the very European texts that constitute the discourse of colonialism.<sup>39</sup> If, for Hulme, there is little hope of contesting the European narratives through recourse to some alternative evidence, what he calls the “protocols for critique” may very well lead to a new appreciation of what these narratives say about colonial dynamics and cultural shifts. To examine further the relation between literary and cultural historical interpretation, we may review briefly the terms in which poststructuralist and postcolonial literary critics have redefined their objects of analysis.

The rise of literary and theoretical approaches to colonialism must be seen in the context of poststructuralism’s attack on the limits of Western epistemologies and structures of knowledge, among them historicism. As Robert Young has shown, colonial discourse analysis has participated in a larger project aimed at exposing the ways in which the presumed universal validity of those epistemologies was an effect of an “ontological imperialism,” whose corollary was the actual subjugation of alternative cultures and systems of knowledge through imperialism.<sup>40</sup> Historicism epitomized the linkages between structures of knowledge and forms of domination, for, taken in its Hegelian sense, History was a unifying, totalizing discourse that assimilated non-European cultures, peoples, and forms of difference into one universal story, whose beginning, center, and endpoint was the West. This position is echoed in much postcolonial criticism. The late Edward Said viewed historicism as the basis of orientalism, which he attacked for its self-validating tendencies and what he considered to be an avoidance of its own relationship with European imperialism.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Gayatri Spivak has pointed out the ways in which historical narratives depend on multiple and strategic silences, exclusions, and marginalizations, suggesting that the

work of criticism is not to recover an alternative viewpoint or historical narrative but rather to chart the “itinerary of the silencing.”<sup>42</sup>

Suspicious of revisionist histories and counternarratives of colonialism as themselves based on nationalist essentialisms and a nostalgia for lost origins, postcolonial theorists have attempted to dismantle colonial histories and discourses through theoretical analysis and deconstruction. Critics of this approach charge that colonial discourse analysis relies on a set of ahistorical, overreaching suppositions that reduce all of Western knowledge and representation to its instrumentality in colonialist expansion, thus tacitly assuming the unchallenged efficacy of European imperial power around the globe.<sup>43</sup> Said, despite his Foucauldian bent, considered fifteen hundred years of Western discourse on the “Orient” to be a unified discursive formation that produced an object for Western domination and control.<sup>44</sup> Yet, whereas Said traced the institutions, disciplines, and discourses in which “orientalist” knowledge developed over time, critics such as Homi Bhabha have invoked transhistorical theoretical concepts to critique colonialism as a discursive system. In his psychoanalytic framework, singular abstractions such as “the colonial subject,” “ambivalence,” “mimicry” and “hybridity” pose a serious impediment to thinking through variations in colonial discourses and their effects in different times and places.<sup>45</sup> In general, the very concept of “colonial discourse” itself condemns much of the analysis to tautology, since critics define the object in terms identical to the arguments made about it. The designation almost always prejudges the discourse it seeks to critique as that which, either by design or effect, produces non-Europeans as denigrated, domesticated others of a Western imperial self.

From the perspective of this study, the most troubling historical blind spot resulting from postcolonial theory’s concentration on nineteenth-century imperialisms and the attendant fetishization of the category of “native/colonized” is its almost complete neglect of one of the most important features of early modern European colonialism—colonial slavery in the Americas. The exclusion of slavery and slave societies from most recent “theories” of colonial discourse raises many questions about the kinds of issues this subdiscipline is willing to raise and why. Why does the cultural critique of colonialism eschew those cultures forged on the basis of relations of domination obtaining from two or more transplanted populations? What happens in cases in which the native is eliminated and deep settler colonialism persists with imported populations of exploitable labor, extracted from both the colonial center and a third peripheral site of encounter, exchange, and coercion? How do such conditions affect the way colonial discourse con-

structs its object and the stories it has to tell? The presence of slave societies is one of the unifying traits of the colonial cultures of the Americas, dating from the first modern European colonial enterprise in the fifteenth century. While slave societies have informed much thinking about the relationship between race and class oppression, specifically in the development of capitalist power relations, the postcolonial theorists have largely stayed out of the debate.<sup>46</sup>

In one of the most forceful critiques of postcolonial theory's flight from history, Benita Parry has argued that postcolonial criticism's refusal to provide any account of change, discontinuity, and social conflict homogenizes the many states of imperialism and "obliterate[s] the role of the native as historical subject."<sup>47</sup> Although recent work on eighteenth-century colonialisms attends to many of these issues, there remains a significant methodological chasm between the project of contextualizing historically the discourses under study and that of providing interpretations of the cultural or social dynamics of colonialism through the analysis of those discourses. Alternatively, when cultural or historical claims are advanced, they often do not concern specific areas of colonial influence but rather broad structural relationships between Europe and the non-European world. Madeleine Dobie's study of literary representations of the Orient laments the failure of previous studies to assess "the historical evolution of French colonial policy and the changing interplay between this policy and the literary sphere."<sup>48</sup> While she justifiably departs from the tendency to couple eighteenth-century French orientalism with an undifferentiated concept of "colonial discourse," her contextualizations mainly relate to French domestic politics, aesthetic movements, and colonial policies toward the Orient. Srinivas Aravamudan, on the other hand, takes up the question of subaltern agency in European cultural texts pertaining to a range of geographic regions and political relationships between Europeans and non-Europeans.<sup>49</sup> However, since many of the works he analyzes do not concern actual colonies (or if they do they represent derivative or fictional discourses about them), his larger claims concern what might be called the global imagination of Enlightenment Europe rather than the eighteenth-century colonies themselves. In a more radical attempt to merge colonial discourse studies with historical interpretation, Ann McClintock arrives at a "situated psychoanalysis . . . that is simultaneously a psychoanalytically informed history."<sup>50</sup> Rejecting the textualist mode of literary scholarship, McClintock deals with what she considers to be "the more demanding historical task of interrogating the social practices, economic conditions, and psycho-

analytic dynamics that motivate and constrain human desire, action and power.”<sup>51</sup> Yet, given McClintock’s interest in the relation between imperialism, industrial capital, and categories of race, class, and gender in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century British empire, her methodology ultimately leads her to make broad claims about the role of imperialism in the formation of Western industrial modernity rather than to analyze in depth the dynamics of a particular colonial locale.

By contrast, what motivates this study of French colonial narratives is neither a concern with early modern French imperial power writ large nor a deep interest in studying colonialist representations for their own sake. I am compelled, rather, by the role literary analysis has to play in reinterpreting narrative sources that in some cases constitute the only surviving written account of peoples and cultures of the colonial French Caribbean at particular points in time. My aim is both to contribute to the literary history of a region best known for its postcolonial literatures and to interrogate the cultural, sexual, and racial dynamics of emerging slave societies by exploring representations produced by the colonizing culture itself. If I willingly tread on the unstable ground that lies between “history” and “representation,” it is because I wish to blur the distinction between them. In this respect, I defer to the poststructuralist claim that no narrative bears a privileged relation to “reality” and that the very idea of referentiality or representation fails to recognize the role of narrative itself in constituting the reality it pretends only to describe. This is not to say that there are no events, materialities, or feelings in human experience, but rather that they are always constructed in and mediated through language, most often in a narrative structure that, as Roland Barthes reminds us, derives from myth and imposes certain meanings and constraints intrinsic to the form on what then becomes knowable as “reality” or “the past.”<sup>52</sup> Whereas narrative sources are the stories told by contemporary actors about their lives, experiences, and beliefs, historical discourse builds new narratives by deducing from the former what it considers to be the truest or most plausible stories about the events they describe. As Hayden White has argued, traditional historiography has maintained the assumption that narrative offers a simulacrum of the structure and processes of “real” events and that the significations of narrative accord with the imagined historical referent.<sup>53</sup>

Of course, the other and perhaps more difficult lesson of poststructuralism is that, in the words of Spivak, “we cannot but narrate,” and thus we are forever caught within the epistemological and linguistic structures that we critique.<sup>54</sup> The challenge, then, is to forge a critical practice that takes

this into account. Literary scholars such as Peter Hulme have managed the radical antifoundationalism of poststructuralist thought by professing not a transcendental truth but rather a subjective or provisional one informed by the political agenda of the present. In this respect, they acknowledge that their stories are not entirely representative of the pasts to which they ostensibly refer. I would add to that the claim that, if the past is only knowable as a succession of narratives, then the work of interpreting those stories becomes a central, if not *the* central, task of scholars who concern themselves with it. By interpretation, I do not mean the distillation of “truth” from “falsity” but rather the critical analysis of extant narratives; their truth claims; the conditions of their production; their allegorical, rhetorical, and formal features; and the latent and manifest meanings of the stories they tell. I therefore part company with some poststructuralist critics of colonialism by assuming that texts exist in contexts (cultural, economic, social, or political) that are in many cases evidenced by the texts themselves. In addition, authors are critical to my project both as personages in the stories they recount and as writing subjects operating in a discursive field they reflect and at times challenge.

In these respects, I share some of the contentions of New Historicist criticism, notably the belief in the “mutual embeddedness” of art and history and the idea that it is possible to treat “all of the written and visual traces of a particular culture as a mutually intelligible network of signs.”<sup>55</sup> New Historicists approach texts previously considered nonliterary or non-canonical and illuminate the “cultural matrix” out of which representations emerge. However, I differ from the response offered by Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher to the most challenging and productive attack on historicist criticism, namely, the suggestion that the application of literary interpretive strategies to nonliterary objects leads critics to aestheticize culture or, in the worst case, to “endorse as aesthetically gratifying every miserable, oppressive structure and every violent action of the past.”<sup>56</sup> I formulate the problem in relation to Arun Mukherjee’s critique of postcolonial criticism, which, in her view, leaves scholars only one discursive position: “We are forever forced to interrogate European discourse, of only one particular kind; the ones that degrade and deny our humanity.”<sup>57</sup> How and why do we read sources that denigrate and offend our humanity? What are the goals of reading nonliterary narratives of domination with a literary interpretive methodology? What Gallagher and Greenblatt implicitly suggest, and what I have discovered, is that what has been kept out of the canon reflects the most disavowed aspects of a culture, what it must expel, or, in



Julia Kristeva's terms, abject, in order to create an image of itself and its past consistent with its ruling ideology.<sup>58</sup> In Western liberal discourse, slavery is either repressed or treated as a kind of refuse that has been dutifully shed in order to universalize liberal ideologies of freedom, individuality, and the rights to property, even as each of these ideas developed in parallel with and were arguably informed by contrary notions of bondage, nonpersonhood, and property in persons.

Gallagher's and Greenblatt's response to the question of how to avoid aestheticizing the cultural is to retreat to the canon, the interpretation of "the writers we love," as what is truly in question, what really stands to gain from serious attention to "culture." The intent, they argue, has not been to "leave works of literature behind" but to "venture out to unfamiliar cultural texts," so that "these texts—often marginal, odd, fragmentary, unexpected, and crude—could in turn begin to interact in interesting ways with the intimately familiar works of the literary canon."<sup>59</sup> Yet recourse to the canon as the justification for cultural work eschews the more interesting and radical challenge New Historicism poses to both literature and history, that is, the idea that reading cultures as texts means that some of our conclusions will concern peoples and cultures as well as texts. This is especially true in the case of slavery, in which there are no "great" works of literature and in which the entire system constitutes the abject that has been expelled from the colonizer's cultural memory. Whereas many postcolonial critics have essentially adopted the New Historicist approach by invoking colonialism and slavery as a lens through which to reread the "greats"—Montesquieu, Diderot, Raynal, Voltaire—I have chosen to study these abjected systems as cultures in themselves. While demonstrating the interest of certain works individually and in relation to metropolitan discourses of witchcraft, magic, libertinage, nobility, and race, for example, I am equally concerned to situate them within the environment in which they emerged, and to use my literary training to say something about that context as I read it in the texts. There are many questions about cultures that historians do not or cannot ask and literary scholars can. In my view, literary interpretive strategies offer the most powerful means of probing the ideas, beliefs, power relations, anxieties, and fantasies of a society through the partial accounts left in its cultural narratives. The goal is not to aestheticize the abject but to serve memory by refusing to forget or to accept uncritically inherited accounts of the past.

The contours of this project thus reveal my fascination with origins. The mixed cultures and societies of the New World offer rather precise circum-

stances of origin, and we refuse to acknowledge them at our peril. Origins here are not a fetish on which to found claims of truth or authenticity but rather a point from which to gain an understanding of culture as a process of change. In this sense, historicity functions as an antidote to cultural fundamentalisms of all kinds. The particular availability of origins in the Caribbean is also reflected in my openness to Freudian psychoanalysis and its idea of primary repression, which becomes especially important when discussing the sexual aspects of racial slavery. Otherwise I employ a range of tools that literary and cultural theory bring to bear on these texts, together with the widest possible awareness of subsequent narratives (historical, literary, or anthropological) about the early French Caribbean. In this respect, my approach is inspired by the work of Peter Hulme, Joan Dayan, and Françoise Vergès.<sup>60</sup> Like them, I refuse to limit myself to a critique of representation, or even ideology, as though there is something outside of representation that is the province of History alone. I contend that literary interpretation of narrative discourse produces forms of truth that are theoretical in nature, that is, whose explanatory potential derives not from a presumption of fact but rather from the critic's ability to make meaning from the analysis of a set of discourses in their relation to one another.

### *Creolization in the Old Regime*

In maintaining that no narrative has a privileged relation to something like "reality," I analyze a range of genres, both nonfictional and fictional, as every source offers insight into the values and dynamics of the culture in which it was produced. The questions I ask of the corpus address blind spots in prevailing explanations of the cultures of slavery offered by theorists, historians, novelists, and literary scholars. A key concept framing this study is the idea of "creolization," which scholars commonly invoke, alongside notions of *mestizaje* and hybridity, to describe processes of fusion and syncretism between radically different cultures and ethnicities. Due to the speed, intensity, and violence of the migratory movements and cultural flows that characterized the development of colonialism and racial slavery in the Caribbean islands, many critics and scholars regard the region as a paradigm for the cross-cultural contacts, transformation, and heterogeneity that have come to typify a globalized, postcolonial world. Yet the generalized espousal of creolization theory has arguably obscured the local specificity of the concept and its different valences in anglophone and francophone Caribbean cultural theory.

On one hand, the term *creolization* refers to what many consider to be a cultural nationalist view of Caribbean social history formulated by anglophone West Indian intellectuals in direct refutation of prevailing notions of the Caribbean colonies in British imperial historiography. Building on the idea of cross-cultural transfer defined by the sociologist Fernando Ortiz as “transculturation,” the Jamaican historian Kamau Brathwaite’s notion of creolization conceives of the plantation as a transformative, productive space, not just for tropical exports but also for cultures and languages. Following Ortiz’s emphasis on the mutual exchange of culture between groups, where each is both active and passive, impacted by and influencing the other in the dynamic production of a new, derivative culture, Brathwaite sees creolization as a “cultural action—material, psychological and spiritual—based upon the stimulus/response of individuals within the society to their environment and—as white/black, culturally discrete groups—to each other.”<sup>61</sup> During a time of Caribbean nationalisms and independences, “creolization” and the corollary notion of “creole society” were meant to oppose the prevalent assumption among British colonial historians that Jamaican society was, as Brathwaite puts it, merely “a declining appendage of Great Britain [whose] internal structure and body was, at best, a parody of the metropolitan, at worst, a disorganized, debased and uncreative polity.”<sup>62</sup> In contrast, Brathwaite’s theory stresses the importance of integration and change within and across groups in a stratified power dichotomy.<sup>63</sup> While on one hand this adaptation led newcomers to adopt behaviors and attitudes linked to their new position with respect to the other group in the racial hierarchy—racial prejudice for whites and socialization into plantation labor and Afro-Creole forms of recreation for slaves—Brathwaite’s theory also conceives of cultural flows and influences between groups, such as the slaves’ imitation of white culture and privilege and the impact of black Creole linguistic and cultural forms on white Creole speech, tastes, and styles of dance.

Departing from Brathwaite’s historical analysis and interest in social relations, francophone Caribbean cultural theorists have emphasized the Creole language as a paradigm for other forms of cultural exchange between groups in the region. Creolization is thus a process of cultural transformation productive of new ways of thinking, knowing, and imagining that diverge from colonialist epistemologies and exclusionary identity formations based in fixed notions of race, language, and nation. Important here is the idea that linguistic and cultural creation was instrumental as a practice of resistance for slaves. Building on Édouard Glissant’s notion of orality as the

privileged site of collective memory,<sup>64</sup> the *créoliste* writers Raphaël Confiant, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Jean Bernabé locate Caribbean literary agency in the sonorities of the slave, the silences of the maroon, and the orality of the Creole storyteller. Their view of creolization highlights the complex dialectic between violence and accommodation marking social relations on the plantation: “For three centuries, the islands . . . proved to be the real forges of a new humanity, where languages, races, religions, customs, ways of being from all over the world were brutally uprooted and transplanted in an environment where they had to reinvent life.”<sup>65</sup>

While their theory remains intimately tied to a historical consciousness of colonial fusions and hybridities, the *créolistes* follow Glissant in privileging literature over history as the discourse best able to represent the creolizing process. Like many Caribbean writers, Glissant sees history as unable to speak to a populace whose collective memory has been repeatedly erased by the brutality of colonialism and the manipulations of official ideologies and whose lived experience is constantly defamiliarized by the globalizing consumer culture to which it increasingly aspires. In a society that has been abused by prejudicial and partial accounts of the past, history as a discourse is associated with colonial ideologies. For Glissant, the role of the writer is to articulate a relation between present and past, what he calls “a prophetic vision of the past.”<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Derek Walcott, who views history as problematic in the Caribbean, writes that “what has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention.”<sup>67</sup> In addition to rejecting official history, the *créoliste* writers question the ability of colonial texts to represent the creolization process: “In its propaganda, self-censorship, colonial apologies, and heavy, almost mathematical deployment of information, the writing of the record (*registre*) clamors with more literary silence than even the smallest stone engraved by the Savages.”<sup>68</sup> The writer of “*créolité*” thus writes over and against “la Chronique coloniale,” proclaiming literature to be the privileged site of the restitution of Creole identities and the tradition of the *conteur créole*.<sup>69</sup>

Yet, creolization theory raises pressing questions about the very colonial histories rejected by the *créolistes*. These relate to the very term *créole*, which they claim as a cultural signifier. In Martinique and Guadeloupe today, *créole* refers to an “*enracinement local*,” in counterdistinction to exterior reference points for cultural identity.<sup>70</sup> However, the use of this term to valorize an identity distinct from that of “Africa” or “Europe” has a long history within colonialist discourse. The word *créole*, in French, origi-

nates from the Hispano-Portuguese terms “*criollo/crioulo*,” which originally referred to both blacks and whites born in the colonial Americas.<sup>71</sup> The colonial missionary writers Du Tertre and Labat used the term to mean simply “born in the colonies,” a designation used for both the master and servile classes.<sup>72</sup> From the revolutionary period on, the word *créole* developed a more restricted usage, referring only to whites by the nineteenth century. This meaning becomes solidified in the *Dictionnaire Littré*, for example, where *créole* is defined as “homme blanc, femme blanche, originaire des colonies.”<sup>73</sup> The fact that today the *Petit Robert* retains the primary meaning of *créole* as a “person of the white race, born in the tropical colonies, notably the Antilles,” indicates the persistence of the term’s racial connotation in France. This meaning also points to the double contestation inherent in its reappropriation by contemporary writers to oppose divisive notions of racial difference. A return to the historical record thus reveals an ironic continuity with postcolonial meanings applied to the term *créole*.

My adoption of the term *creolization* to refer to cross-cultural negotiations within and between ethnic groups in the Caribbean is in fact conditional on the critical investigation of the literary traces and narratives left by colonial writers who witnessed, described, and produced their experiences in discourse. Rather than taking creolization as a stable signifier whose objective historical referent is knowable through historical research or imaginative reconstruction, I collapse the study of creolization onto the study of representations of colonial cultures and societies. Brathwaite began that project, but his own readings were often burdened by a positivist attempt to lay out the precise parameters and components of Creole society, which led him to reproduce unwittingly the same style of ethnographic inventory prevalent in colonial discourse. Furthermore, as Chris Bongie has argued, Brathwaite does not call into question the existence of culturally distinct groups he defines as white and black and links to “cultural bases” in Europe and Africa, thus betraying an essentialist belief in the presence of precolonial identities that converge in the creolization process. Yet, while cautioning against notions of autonomous culture that underlie theories of cultural fusion and hybridity, we must bear in mind the historical processes of colonization and enslavement whereby internally diverse populations from different parts of the world were structured into rigidly defined socio-ethnic blocks primarily on the basis of color. When creolization theorists err on the side of essentialism, it is, I would contend, because they momentarily naturalize these historically constructed colonial social or ethnic categories (African/black slaves, European/white colonists, Island Caribs, etc.) as dis-

tinct cultures that contribute to a Creole mosaic of culture, elements of which are shared by all groups in the colonies. Whereas this narrative is meant to overturn the discriminatory logic of colonial discourse by positing the cultural interrelatedness of different groups in the colonial hierarchy, it has the effect of masking the specific mechanisms of violence and segregation meant to keep colonial populations artificially separated and contained along lines of race and class. As Nigel Bolland has argued, the integrationist, synthetic logic of creolization theories tends to neglect the structural contradictions and social conflicts of the plantation. Although the French *créolistes* gesture to the “brutal entry into contact” and “non-harmonious mixing” of peoples and cultures, they nonetheless imagine the “transactional aggregate” of cultural elements as having the power to transcend and subvert relations of force by creating a “kaleidoscopic totality.” What gets left out is a consideration of how the cultural flows both within and between diverse groups were impacted by the violence of plantation slavery.<sup>74</sup>

Since the French narrative sources I analyze were produced almost exclusively from the perspective of those in power, the view of creolization I distill mainly concerns the colonizing group, while suggesting the kinds of exchanges, negotiations, and resistances that took place within and between the Carib, slave, and free colored populations. My inquiry also responds to the inadequacies of creolization theories on the question of the relation between the evolution of shared cultural forms and social antagonisms in French colonial slave societies. Several important questions arise from the resultant ambiguity: How did culture cross boundaries of power and violence? In what ways were Creole syncretisms and fusions instigated by specific practices of domination, and how did the process of cultural exchange itself impact those practices? Whose culture was being exchanged with whom, and under what circumstances? Finally, were syncretisms and forms of integration always liberatory for the subalterns, or did they just as often serve the interests of the colonizing group?

Nowhere are these questions more pressing than in relation to the issues of gender, sexuality, and desire which occupy an important place in colonial narratives but have often been underexplored in male-authored Caribbean cultural theory. Whereas the creolization thesis conceives of cultural flows in the presence of relations of domination, sexuality is viewed as enabling greater integration through miscegenation.<sup>75</sup> In Brathwaite’s brief consideration of the subject, sexuality contributes to the creolization process by binding members of radically opposed social groups biologically,

socially, and culturally: "It was in the intimate area of sexual relationships that the greatest damage was done to white creole apartheid policy and where the most significant—and lasting—inter-cultural creolization took place."<sup>76</sup> For Brathwaite, the biological product of miscegenation—the colored population—provided a sort of social cement to further integrate society. Francophone writers are far less explicit about the roles of gender and sexuality, tending to invoke *métissage* only to pass immediately to its metaphorical rather than literal meaning. For Édouard Glissant, *métissage* refers to the "encounter with the Other," one step along the way to the full complexity of creolization, defined as a "métissage without limits."<sup>77</sup> Glissant thus moves away from negative images of the *métis* formulated in what he calls "traditional literature."<sup>78</sup> Likewise, Chamoiseau, Confiant, and Bernabé reject the ideology of racial naming in favor of the linguistic metaphor for cultural fusion: "In multiracial societies such as ours, it seems urgent that we drop the usual racial distinctions and return to the habit of calling our countryman by the only term that suits him: Creole."<sup>79</sup>

The problem is that by setting aside issues of gender and sexuality, or by viewing them as mitigating factors in an otherwise brutal system of domination and subordination, these writers overlook the ways in which certain sexual practices contributed to and reinforced those very power structures.<sup>80</sup> This contention relates in many respects to the first black American feminist critique of male historians' avoidance of the sexual exploitation of female slaves in the antebellum United States. Repudiating decades of historical research by male scholars whom they considered to have downplayed the reality of sexual violence, portrayed slave women as complicitous, or cast sexual relationships as benevolent expressions of white male desire, black feminist critics such as Angela Davis and bell hooks redefined sexuality between master and slave in terms of rape. As such, sex became a "weapon of domination," an "institutionalized form of terrorism" through which male slaveholders exploited the bodies of female captives, degendered them with respect to Euro-American codes of femininity, and "extinguished [their] will to resist."<sup>81</sup> In a moderated formulation, Hortense Spillers has questioned whether "'sexuality' as a term of implied relationship and desire is . . . appropriate, manageable, or accurate to any of the familial arrangements under a system of enslavement, from the master's family to the captive enclave."<sup>82</sup>

I am committed to evaluating slavery as a system of sexual domination, but my perspective is closer to that of Saidiya Hartman, Joan Dayan, and Arlette Gautier, who regard desire as an unavoidable component of the

violence that structured gendered relations of power between masters and slaves.<sup>83</sup> Far from being irrelevant in a system in which slaveholders claimed right of access to the bodies they “possessed,” desire was a function of power that deeply impacted practices and ideologies of domination. The question then becomes who desired and what were the uses, parameters, and consequences of those desires and their pursuit, both real and imagined? In her discussion of nineteenth-century antebellum slave law, Hartman analyzes “the dynamics of enjoyment in a context in which joy and domination and use and violence could not be separated.”<sup>84</sup> In her view, desire and seduction are strategies of mastery as well as terms in a logic that celebrates the surrender and perfect submission of the enslaved.<sup>85</sup> Arlette Gautier and Joan Dayan offer subtle discussions of the conditions under which sex, desire, and love were possible, and for whom, in Old Regime French Caribbean slave societies. For Gautier, desire existed only for the master, who constituted the female slave as an object of his desire, unable to refuse herself.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Dayan has analyzed what she calls the “cult of desire” in late-eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue, whereby white men were consumed with frenetic passions for slaves and especially free women of color. “No matter how degrading, how despotic the effects of slavery,” she writes, “there remained a place for love, a kind of excrescence from the everyday oppression and torture, an experience that could be named and claimed by the ‘civilized’ agents of an odious institution.”<sup>87</sup>

This insistence on “loving” their slaves coexisted with the most extreme performances of terror, thus raising the question of the role of desire and sexuality in strategies of denial that undergirded the masters’ sense of legitimacy. On the other hand, the frequency with which masters imagined frenetic passions to reside in the slave women they subjugated and abused suggests as well their desire for sexual hegemony in the Gramscian sense, that is, a kind of power accrued through the consent of the subordinated group.<sup>88</sup> To examine the relation between the masters’ sexual practices and the ideologies and practices of racial domination under slavery, I embrace the psycho-analytical valences of the term *desire*. Moving beyond issues of attraction and seduction, white colonial sexuality may thus be placed in relation to individual psychology, the emotions, gender identity, filial relations, and the unconscious, all of which had a formative role in shaping individual displays of mastery, as well as the imaginary justifications for structures of racial rule in the colonies.<sup>89</sup> Drawing on carefully selected concepts in Freudian theory in my analysis of colonial narratives, I show that libidinal dynamics were both legible on the surface of colonial relationships and activated fantasies,



displacements, wishes, and fears in the white colonial unconscious that were no less central to the functioning of a brutal regime. Especially important here is the notion of fantasy, by which I mean the imaginary or unconscious fulfillment of a desire that is otherwise prohibited by reality or social norms. In classical psychoanalytic theory, fantasies are linked to reality in that they block out shameful memories or unpleasurable aspects of experience, and they can also play a formative or structuring role in a subject's life, behavior, and actions.<sup>90</sup> As I will argue, interracial sexual fantasies were the primary means through which white men legitimated their desired social and racial supremacy while at the same time repressing the brutality and sexual violence of racial slavery. At various points in my analysis, I place legal codes and discriminations enacted in the colony under scrutiny as themselves symptomatic of often unacknowledged desires, anxieties, and fantasies among the colonial elite. Finally, desire as a concept allows, in certain cases, for the careful redistribution of agency across the power dichotomy, such that slave women and free women of color may be viewed as agents and negotiators of desire, as well as victims of sexual violence.

### *The Libertine Colony*

Through the concept of "libertinage," the second half of this book examines the roles of desire and sexuality in mediating colonial power relations. Interestingly, the earliest appearance of the word *libertine* was in the context of a slave society, that of ancient Rome. Its etymological roots go back to the Latin *libertinus*, meaning "freed slave." Roman law opposed this concept to *ingenuus*, or "free man," but the true opposite of a libertine was a slave. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France, the word referred to religious disbelief, a refusal to submit to religious authority, and immorality. Thus, the first literary movement by that name embraced an *esprit critique* characterized by skepticism, epicurism, and a critique of religious belief and dogma. This literary revolt took a philosophical turn with the emergence of *libertinage érudit*, a movement concerned with sensualist philosophy and empiricism. By the eighteenth century, this style of thought came to be known simply as "philosophy," whereas *libertinage*, while retaining the meaning of irreligion, referred mainly to the refusal of conventional sexual morality and the unbridled pursuit of sensual pleasures. The accompanying literature celebrated gallantry and eroticism, attacked transcendental ethics, and advanced earlier inquiries into materialist philosophy.<sup>91</sup>

When deployed by representatives of church and state, *libertine* and

*libertinage* were almost always used to identify and proscribe practices that threatened royal power and religious authority. The title of this study, *The Libertine Colony*, refers on one hand to a central anxiety in colonial texts concerning the nature of the creolization process. From the inception of colonization to its apex in the late eighteenth century, missionaries, writers, and travelers consistently invoked the terms *libertine* and *libertinage* to describe the colonies as a space of immorality, religious heresy, violence, and sexual license. The discourse of *libertinage* was largely a reaction to what observers considered to be threatening and uncontrollable about the creolizing process as French emigrants reacted and accommodated to the cultural difference of native Caribs and imported Africans while spontaneously fashioning new identities outside the bounds of traditional authority, morality, and social codes. As early as 1640, the Jesuit missionary Jacques Bouton expressed his shock at the nearly complete lack of religious supervision on the island of Martinique: "With respect to morals, our Frenchmen are like a people almost completely abandoned by spiritual assistance, without Mass, priests, preachers, or sacraments, in too great a state of license, liberty, and impunity."<sup>92</sup> While Bouton limited most of his criticisms to religious deviants and protestants—"heretics, a handful of libertines and atheists, slow-witted and brutish minds"—other early missionaries openly criticized sexual immorality in the colonies.<sup>93</sup> For Du Tertre, both religious and sexual indiscretions had led to the bad reputation of the colonies in France, a reputation he claimed was no longer merited: "Although the licentious life of some of the first settlers [*habitants*] has disgraced the Islands and made them known as a land of *libertinage* and impiety, I can truthfully attest that God has so greatly blessed the zeal and work of the missionaries, that one will soon find as much virtue and piety there as in France."<sup>94</sup> Yet Du Tertre's self-interested optimism was belied by later observers and colonial officials, who almost universally decried the lack of public decency in the colonies. Among the most contentious and volatile issues in colonial history, sexual *libertinage* took many forms, from the traffic in Indian and European women and the taking of African slaves as wives and concubines to sordid attacks and sexual indulgences on the plantation and the libidinal excesses in colonial cities, where free women of color rivaled their white competitors for the richest white men.

In invoking the term *libertinage*, I intend not only to trace the discourse through which colonial writers criticized religious, moral, and social indiscipline in the Caribbean but to propose an alternative understanding of the centrality of desire and sexuality to the ideologies and practices of domina-

tion in Creole society. In this respect, I reconceive libertinage not merely as the moral deviance of particular colonial subjects but rather as a libidinal economy undergirding exploitative power relations among whites, free nonwhites, and slaves in the colonies. This understanding of libertinage relates to the literary tradition insofar as, in the libertine imagination, desire and sexuality were detached from sentiment and instrumentalized within gendered relations of power. Most famously, writers such as Crébillon and Laclos portrayed figures of a declining aristocracy, male and female, competing among themselves for pleasure, influence, and social prestige through an endless cycle of seduction, manipulation, and abandonment.<sup>95</sup> Voluntarily sequestered in the castle, boudoir, or monastery, fictional libertines are supremely idle, filling their time by deploying desire and pleasure to satisfy their vanity, greed, and desire for power. Critics have repeatedly made the connection between the pleasure principle and the will to power in libertine fiction, in some cases characterizing the erotic situation as a form of slavery.<sup>96</sup> In Peter Brooks's classic interpretation of Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons*, eroticism among the leisure class gives rise to a conception of the group as a closed order of social conformity, "a society which has given exclusive value to games of domination and control, pursuit and enslavement, which can, in human logic, find their outcome only in the erotic relationship."<sup>97</sup> The Marquis de Sade in particular insisted on the mutually reinforcing relation between exploitative social relations and libertinage and broadened the parameters of the social to include relations between different classes. Yet, what is fascinating is that Sade's most horrific scenarios of terror and pleasure may have in fact been inspired by the French colonial slave societies of his time. Joan Dayan first drew attention to stunning parallels between the Sadean imaginary and colonial reality when she placed *The 120 Days of Sodom* and *Juliette* in the context of planter discourse and the infamous Code noir. As she argues, Sade's literary imaginary was fundamentally shaped by his reading of colonial discourses and histories: "Sade brought the plantation hell and its excesses into enlightenment Europe. . . . The debauchery and unbridled tyranny of Sade's libertines have their sources in the emblematic Creole planters, dedicated to the heady interests of pleasure, greed, and abandon."<sup>98</sup>

The correspondence between the Sadean imaginary and practices of colonial subjection may be further inferred from Marcel Hénaff's analysis of *The 120 Days* as a scintillating critique of both aristocratic privilege and protoindustrial regimes of labor exploitation.<sup>99</sup> Though Hénaff reads mainly through a Marxist, structuralist framework, with no reference to

colonialism, he reveals the author's deep insights into the relations among desire, power, and domination, thus enabling provocative comparisons with the social order of slavery. For Hénaff, Sadean libertinage functions as a highly rationalized system of exploitation in which the *jouissance* of the one is based on the pain of the others. In Sade's libertine factory, the primary product is pleasure itself, "fabricated" through the expenditure of proletarian bodies for the benefit of the aging libertine *maitre* and his coterie of aristocrats. The master's wealth and membership in the nobility afford him an immense store of political and economic capital with which to secure an endlessly renewable sexual labor force, comprised of anonymous individuals selected for their diverse domestic and erotic tasks. In Hénaff's analysis of "the libertine proletariat," what becomes abundantly apparent is the ease with which arbitrary social relations of domination are mediated through libidinal means. In the Sadean imaginary, extreme power inequities between the nobility and their social subalterns are enacted and indeed enforced through the domination of the latter as bodies in the service of libertinage. Writes Hénaff, "Silling tells the dirty little secret about this mode of production: that masters of capital, through the factory system, become masters of bodies as well, and that the sexual exploitation of these bodies is the only logical conclusion of their industrial exploitation."<sup>100</sup>

In some respects, Hénaff's reading of Sade is useful as an analytic model for thinking through the role of desire in colonial practices of domination, for only in a slave colony were the extreme scenarios envisioned by the author possible. Yet Sade's theoretical insight alone cannot account for the political and social dimensions of libertinage in the French Caribbean, where the great majority of human beings were held in perpetual bondage, sexual agency was attributed to more than one class and gender, and, as I shall argue, the reproductive consequences of informal sexual relationships greatly impacted the discourse on libertinage and the emergent social order, as well as white attitudes toward racial and gender differences. These complicating factors are evident from the testimony of contemporary travelers and colonists, who never failed to comment on one of the most shocking aspects of Creole society—the prevalence of interracial libertinage amid a system of extreme segregation based on race. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Saint-Domingue, the largest and most "prosperous" of France's sugar-producing colonies, where, according to a late-eighteenth-century Swiss traveler, Girod de Chantrans, libertinage was the main diversion and principle topic of conversation among whites after their own self-interests.<sup>101</sup> From the inception of the plantation economy, colonial au-