

Terms around race, class, and legal status in colonial and revolutionary Saint-Domingue

Legal status vs. race? Gender and power? Alliances? There will be complex and surprising shifts throughout the revolution, with continuing impacts on Haitian history. To help you sort through your reading, consider the following terms—and the complications of those terms.

The Colonial Racializing project:

Jean Casimir: “In the first chapter of that book [*Pa bliye 1804*] I argue; ‘The “Indians” and “Blacks” (of America) inhabited only the universe of the colonists. They cannot be found anywhere else...The only place where the color of the skin indicates the function of social actors is within colonialist projects’ (Casimir 2004b, 50). Interpretations that privilege race (and color) in their analysis of Saint-Domingue erase the very ethnicities that plantation accounting took note of, in its own way, at the moment when captives were acquired...these interpretations erase from the history of humanity the variety of life experiences (memory, knowledge, language, emotions, institutions) that existed before, during and after enslavement. Our social behavior is explained according to the meanings given to our skin color by our executioners, rather than through reference to what we have learned from our own knowledge, our daily experiences, and the way we live those experiences...The planters...eliminated the African nations ...and created the opposition between black and white. In the process, they created two foundational aggregates that had no history outside of the colonial gesture. A ladder of shades of skin, going from black to white...” (Jean Casimir, *The Haitians: A Decolonial History*, trans. Dubois, 2020, 15)

Consider the work of the most widely-read *colonial* chronicler at the time of the revolution, Moreau de Saint-Méry, a member of the conservative, pro-slavery Club Massiac in Paris (essentially a lobbying group for plantation interests) From *Libète*, ed. Arthur and Dash, 1999:

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(12) THE ‘PIGMENTOCRACY’: RACIAL CATEGORIES

Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description de la partie française de l’Isle de Saint-Domingue*, 1797

Saint-Méry includes 32 pages describing the recognised colour combinations of non-whites – a macabre illustration of the white planters’ racist obsession with making clear their difference from the offspring of their liaisons with black slaves. In the section entitled, ‘The Results of Interbreeding’, he categorises non-whites into ten classes according to their genetic composition going back seven generations.

I must say here, that in the evaluation of the white and black parts of the many mixes, I have already noted:

the black	0-7 parts white, 128-121 parts black
the sacatra	8-16 parts white, 120-112 parts black
the griffon	24-32 parts white, 104-96 parts black
the marabou	40-48 parts white, 88-80 parts black
the mulatto	56-70 parts white, 58-72 parts black
the quadroon	71-96 parts white, 57-32 parts black
the métif	104-112 parts white, 24-16 parts black
the mamelouc	116-120 parts white, 12-8 parts black
the quarteronne	122-124 parts white, 6-4 parts black
the sang-mêlé	125-127 parts white, 3-1 parts black

Translated from French and adapted by Charles Arthur

This list will help you keep track of the terms as used in our readings.

Racial status:

English: Blacks, whites French: noirs, nègres, blancs Kreyol: nèg, blans
French: gens de couleur (usually applied to those with *free* status), mulâtre (mixed race)

Jean Casimir notes, “As leaders of the emancipated slaves, both *métis* and free blacks, they became central to the order of slavery through the roles they played in the *maréchaussée* (police) and the militias.” (*The Haitians*, 2020, 13)

Legal status:

French: esclave (slave), affranchi (referring to an enslaved person who now has free legal status or someone born with free legal status, many of these being gens de couleur)

Financial status:

Poor whites: petits blancs (plantation and town workers)
wealthy whites: grands blancs (plantation owners—often of multiple plantations)

Geographical origin:

Creole: someone born in the colony—of any racial background
Africains, Bossales, Congos/Kongos: enslaved persons born in Africa (the majority at time of the Revolution)

Jean Casimir reframes the majority of the enslaved in Saint Domingue as captives, adding “Since the bulk of the captives reduced to slavery arrived within the decade before the 1791 insurrection, these two segments of the colonial population shared only a very brief period together in the common experience of life in the plantation system. Their reciprocal enmity was born as much of their divergent political interests and behaviors as from the differences in the traditions and practices that were part of their respective collective memories (*The Haitians*, 2020, 14)