

The “Circum-Caribbean” and the Continuity of Cultures: The Donato Colony in Mexico, 1830-1860

by

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Migration is the motor of social change and the leaven of culture.
It is the wild card of politics and the handmaiden to history. Thomas Fiehrer¹

Over a decade ago I attended a Family reunion in Louisiana, and while enjoying the festivities, I came across a genealogy of five inter-related families of the area. My curiosity was piqued by a reference to a family connection with Mexico. As a trained historian of the African Diaspora I found this tidbit irresistible.

The year was 1857, and the newcomers, from Louisiana, had settled in Tlacotalpan near Alvarado, Mexico, about 50 miles inland from the Caribbean port of Veracruz. Their history, like much of the history of the African Diaspora, is virtually unknown. When the new arrivals moved in, there were comments about their appearance, how much money they might have, what kind of work they did, their morals, their customs and their character. Initially, their presence was uneventful. The newcomers, most of whom were farmers, engineers, mechanics and other workers, wrote to family and friends left behind and celebrated the advantages of their new home. Later, however, a U.S.-owned Mexican newspaper ran an editorial that stirred anxiety and fear. The editor was alarmed that more of these people might come and warned that “since the Negro is a creature of imitation and not invention...they will degenerate...and [become] vicious...a nuisance and pest to society.”² Spurred by this glimpse of family history, I decided to investigate this little-known aspect of history in the broader context of the African Diaspora.

Traditionally, the movement of peoples of African origin has tended to be framed almost solely in the context of the Trans-Atlantic enslavement. While many U.S. historians acknowledge that the presence of these Africans forever altered the political, economic, social and cultural nature of the Americas, what is often overlooked is the movement of these unwilling migrants after reaching the “New World.”

This later involuntary migration helped build regional economies in what Thomas Fiehrer terms the “circum-Caribbean” socio-economic formation. Hence from the islands of Hispanola and Cuba, to Florida and the Gulf Coast of Louisiana, from Texas to Veracruz, Mexico a “technical-racial diffusion took place in the 18th and 19th centuries.”³

By recognizing this circum-Caribbean connection and its historical importance in the transference of commodities, as well as of people and culture, we can gain insight into another important aspect of the African migratory experience. The emergence of diverse class and cultural interrelationships between and among the descendants of these “New World Africans” has often been relegated to unimportance, or worse, ignored. In particular, it is often difficult for contemporary African Americans to acknowledge that people of African descent sometimes owned and enslaved other Africans. This paper will explore the activities and interactions of these individuals, while focusing particular attention on a group of free Blacks, often referred to as free people of color (FPOC), (or sometimes as *gens de couleur libre* or even “Creoles of Color”). Depending on their circumstances they sometimes left their homes, at times voluntarily, other times involuntarily, and traveled throughout the circum-Caribbean -- in search of security, property or simply a better life for themselves and their families. We will focus on the ambiguities surrounding this group and the multiple layers of contradiction and representations that arose as they moved in and out of these different - yet interconnected circum-Caribbean societies.

The “Americanization” of Blacks and Europeans in Louisiana

The end of the 18th century ushered in a period of dramatic change in Louisiana, which affected all territorial residence, in particular people of African ancestry. Beginning with the decline of Spanish mercantilism in the late 1780’s and the simultaneous introduction of a hybrid type of sugar cane into Louisiana, thus, the area’s economy experienced an unparalleled expansion.⁴ Prior to this time, the economy was primarily based on small-scale production of indigo, flax, hemp, cotton, sugar, rice and tobacco, mixed with cattle raising.⁵ From the 1790 onward, sugar production dominated the economy once the hybrid sugar cane prospered in the demanding soil and climate of southern Louisiana.⁶

Within a few years land values rose dramatically and those who had taken advantage of Spanish land grant system were positioned to profit tremendously from the “white gold” of sugar, facilitating and accelerating their rise in the class hierarchy. The “invasion” of Anglo-Americans into the Mississippi valley region became an unforeseen consequence of this boom. In 1800, Napoléon Bonaparte was able to coerce the Spanish crown into returning Louisiana to French control. Bonaparte, in need of money to fight his various wars (in particular the Haitian Revolution) was convinced by U.S. ambassador Robert R. Livingston to sell the province of Louisiana to the United States government. Shortly thereafter Anglo-American immigration began in earnest.⁷

The economic prosperity and rapid population shift after the United States purchase of the territory in 1803 changed the power dynamic among the various classes and groups that comprised Louisiana. The French-speaking Saint Domingue refugees, Spanish-speaking Canary Islanders (*Isleños*), as well as Germans and Irish immigrants expanded the ethnic mix of the region.⁸ Not surprisingly antagonisms grew, especially as the number of poorer working class Anglo-American migrated into the region. This situation also alienated a large number of French and Spanish planter families who, in the wake of Louisiana statehood in 1812, opted to leave the area for the Caribbean, especially Cuba, Puerto Rico and Mexico. In 1816, for example, over eighty settlers left Louisiana and moved to Puerto Rico with their enslaved, equipment and capital.⁹ Among those who left for Mexico and the West Indies were a score of *gens de couleur libre* who hoped to continue their livelihood without being victimized by American chauvinism.¹⁰

In 1804, in the aftermath of Haitian independence, another significant connection occurred: the transformation set in motion population movements involving the entire Caribbean region. This movement of peoples and cultures had significant implications as southern Louisiana inherited many of social and cultural elements drawn directly from its circum-Caribbean connections including religious and linguistic syncretism and the development of a population of free people of color within an Africanized culture.¹¹

When shiploads of the Saint Domingue refugees began to arrive in New Orleans, over 10,000 in all, they joined Frenchmen, Creoles, Cajuns, freemen, enslaved Blacks and earlier refugees already residing in the Crescent City.¹² Many of the refugee families lived in small communities in and around New Orleans and, to a degree, maintained their cultural, linguistic and racial distinctiveness. Many of the males of the group kept their commercial ties to the circum-Caribbean (Cuba and Haiti) by seeking employment in the City's Trading Houses.¹³ It is also quite possible that these émigrés had known each other before their arrival in New Orleans, or became acquainted soon thereafter. In later years these connections were to have an important impact on the trade and commerce of the entire region.

While the majority of these refugees remained in New Orleans, about 40% migrated to the Prairie regions of southwest Louisiana, in particular St. Martin Parish (containing present-day Lafayette and Vermilion parishes), St. Mary Parish and St. Landry, while about 48% settling in the River Parishes (Ascension, East Baton Rouge, Iberville, Pointe Coupee and St. James Parishes).¹⁴ These communities remained fairly small, primarily White, and mostly poor. However, between 1803 and 1850, the gender and racial make-up of the community changed as the number of women and *gens de couleur libre* (free persons of color, mostly people of mixed parentage) increased.¹⁵ The refugees, both Black and White, tended to "blend into" (or crossed over into) their new surroundings and primarily worked as farmers, day-laborers and/or craftsmen in the agricultural sector.¹⁶

However some, including free Blacks and *gens de couleur libre*, became planters in the prairie region and a few accumulated significant wealth in land, cattle and Black chattel. Though their numbers were small, they had a noticeable impact on the commercial, cultural and racial developments of Louisiana.

Not surprisingly evidence abounds that many people of African ancestry “crossed-over” the racial and class divide -- what is commonly referred to as “passing.” As Legal Historian Cheryl Harris has noted “Passing...is a feature of race subordination in all societies structured on white supremacy.”¹⁷ The historical evolution of this phenomenon is directly tied to patterns of “White racial domination and economic exploitation that has given passing a certain logic...[and] valorization...as treasured property in a society structured on racial caste” – this was the case in Saint Domingue, Louisiana and, I argue, Mexico.¹⁸

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries *gens de couleur libre* slowly developed their economic position (often benefiting from their white fathers) as well as a distinct group consciousness. As Fiehrer has shown, this situation was almost identical to the *affranchis* in Saint-Domingue, who tended to marry within their class and formed extended “clans tracing descent from a single European ancestor.”¹⁹ These divisions were reinforced and exacerbated by periodic Spanish, French and later U.S. laws that discouraged social and economic interaction between the groups. Such legal impediments had as their aim the creation of barriers between the groups to forestall any collaborative resistance.

At the same time, members of these groups undoubtedly understood that the possibilities existed for “crossing over” class boundaries, and as happened in Saint Domingue, they took advantage of these opportunities whenever possible. Of course, while Free Blacks and *gens de couleur libre* distanced themselves from the societal degradation associated with slavery, they also understood the critical role it played in the process of capital accumulation.

They constituted a proto-middle class, attached more to the business of survival than either to tradition or caste loyalty. To the extent that they were excluded from white society and refused to consort with the enslaved, they preserved themselves as a social group. By filling an economic need and by serving the Spanish government’s aim of using them to offset a class of recalcitrant, and sometimes hostile, French planters, the free colored played a necessary if anomalous role in the life of the colony.²⁰

In the United States, as Cheryl Harris has noted, the historical and legal origins of “Whiteness as property” are to be found in “the parallel systems of domination of Black and Native American peoples out of which were created racially contingent forms of property and property rights....whiteness shares the critical characteristics of property even as the meaning of property had changed over time. In particular, whiteness and property share a common premise – a conceptual nucleus – of a right to exclude.”²¹

This understanding of the relationship between whiteness and property began to take shape in the period immediately after the Native Americans had been dispossessed during a long series of genocidal wars of conquest. Afterwards “White identity became the basis of racialized privilege that was ratified and legitimated in the law as a type of status property.”²² Accordingly the origins of property rights in both Louisiana and Saint Domingue were situated in White racial domination of Native Americans and enslaved Africans.²³ With the arrival of the Saint Domingue refugees to Louisiana in the late 18th and early 19th centuries this situation was magnified, particularly among free women of color (FWC) and enslaved populations.²⁴ During this time of “chaos, venality and materialism” in the prairie frontier of southwest Louisiana, these relationships were reproduced.²⁵

The free Blacks coming to the southwest prairie region of Louisiana (around Opelousas) joined free black people who had arrived in the district as early as 1740. The French *Code Noir*, adopted for Louisiana by the French governor John Law in 1724, considered these individuals “free.” Theoretically, the code granted to “manumitted slaves the same rights, privileges, and immunities, which are enjoyed by freeborn persons.”²⁶ This freedom was extended to their offspring. Claude Oubre and Roscoe Leonard speculate that since no residency requirement for land claimants existed, many fathers sent their freed “mulatto or quadroon” offspring, along with a few enslaved Blacks, to establish homesteads and extend their land holdings. In this way the character of the southwest prairie communities was set in place; the composition of these communities included Whites, free and enslaved Blacks, as well as *gens de couleur libre*.²⁷

In light of this situation, and the relationships that evolved, we must clarify the arguments of Brasseaux et al, that by the middle of the 19th century, economically successful Black families:

...had come to share, to a considerable degree, the culture of the white Creole elite ...This drive toward cultural amalgamation began in the earliest days of the Creole communities' development in the prairie region, when most first-generation free blacks voluntarily abandoned their African names. Creoles of color also became almost universally Roman Catholic and French-speaking, in emulation of their white counterparts. Most slaves in the region ... were Protestant and English-speaking [emphasis added]²⁸

In southwest Louisiana, not unlike the entire circum-Caribbean, the coming together of racial and cultural divergence resulted in a process of *reciprocal* acculturation and assimilation between Blacks and Whites. That is, cultural exchange became a two-way avenue and while Blacks took on certain outward “characteristics” of the White “Creole elite,” these same elites also absorbed remnants of African culture in these same spheres. (Language, religious syncretism, customs etc) In many ways this accounted for the ambiguity over racial classification. What is even more important is how the dominant and subsumed cultures articulated with each other.

Free Blacks and *gens de couleur libre* were not simply ebony reflection of White or Creole culture – a point often ignored by historians of colonial Louisiana. This “cultural” interchange can only be understood as race subordination in a society such as Louisiana’s that was based on white supremacy, whiteness as property, and economic exploitation.²⁹ Accordingly, it should not be surprising that former enslaved Blacks and *gens de couleur libre* sought to maintain the stability of the system that legitimated their existence; a system that depended to a considerable degree on their believing that they had a fundamental interest in maintaining the economic and cultural system (“Whiteness as property”) that prevailed at the time – and the social and political relations that went along with the system.³⁰

Gens de Couleur Libres and the Early Donato Colony

The first families to arrive in the prairie region during the late 18th century were the Lemelles, Auzennes, Meullions and the Donatos, who were *gens de couleur libres*, and the Simiens, who were free Blacks. The most influential of these early families were the Donato clan who had extensive holdings in St. Landry Parish and who owned enslaved Africans during the antebellum period. Amongst these families on the Opelousas and Attakapas prairie the pattern of slave ownership changed very slowly throughout the Spanish period.

Of the 139 families listed in the 1777 census of the Opelousas district only 39 owned slaves while only 15 of these owned more than four slaves. Seven of the 139 families were either free Negroes or free people of color. By 1788 the Opelousas post numbered 1,983 individuals: 1,194 whites; 55 free Negroes and free people of color; and 734 slaves. By 1796 the population of the district was 2,124. There were 20 free families of mixed racial ancestry and 9 free Negro families. These 29 families, consisting of 83 individuals, owned 42 of the 779 slaves in the district."³¹

Also the relationship between master and enslaved, as well as between Black and White people, remained “relatively fluid” during the last years of Spanish rule and the first decade of American hegemony. The primary reason for this fluidity was that most enslavers owned only a few Chattels, given the nature of cattle raising and class relationships; as late as 1817 there were 2,507 enslaved people in the entire Opelousas district. In addition, during this period, wealth and property could move a person into a higher status in the eyes of his neighbors.³² As our previous discussion indicated, several individuals and families managed to accumulate a great amount of wealth in the form of land, cattle, chattels -- and privilege.

The Donato family consisted of three children: Marie Celeste, Victoria, and Martin Donato Bello, all fathered by a White militia officer named Donato Bello and his wife, Marie Jeanne Talliaferro, a free mulatto woman. Martin, who later dropped Bello from his name and called himself Martin Donato, became the patriarch of the entire community of free people of color on the Opelousas frontier. He married Marie Duchesne (also referred to as Mary Ann Duchene and Marianne DuChesne), and they owned substantial land at Bois Mallet and a tract, referred to as his "plantation and residence" at Leonville.³³

The Donato family, in particular the patriarch Martin Donato (Bello), had accumulated a modest fortune in property (including enslaved Blacks) and invested it in trade. According to succession records, in 1832 Martin Donato, guardian (tutor) of his grandson Lucien Donato, petitioned the local Opelousas courts to allow 18 year old Lucien to collect on monies he inherited from his grandmothers estate. The money from Maryann Duchene's estate was to be used for "making a trip to Mexico where he has an uncle and other relations, for the purpose of acquiring the Spanish language, a knowledge of the manners and customs of that country and other information necessary to a young man in his situation."³⁴ The young Lucien Donato received the sizable sum of five hundred dollars, although it is not clear if he ever made the journey, since I found no further records verifying the voyage. What is fairly obvious is that the Donato family had become part of a fluid movement between Louisiana and Mexico prior to 1832. These contacts would also prove invaluable for other members of the *gens de couleur libre* who would subsequently migrate to Mexico. During the late 1830's, what had begun as a trickle of emigrants grew to a steady stream as White Louisianans intensified their efforts to remove the free people of color from the prairies.

The mere presence of Free Blacks and *gens de couleur libre* in the midst of a society based on slavery was intolerable to the rapidly "Americanized" White population of southern Louisiana. To the White plantocracy the term "Free Black (Negro)" remained an oxymoron. They invoked the notion of hypodescent, i.e. the automatic designation of mixed union offspring as inherently inferior – later made law by the so-called "one-drop rule."³⁵ During the early United States period attempts were made to rid the territory of this "undesirable population."³⁶ This follows a familiar pattern identified by historian Harry Heotink and others whereby an economically and socially well-to-do strata within the Black population evolved, which subsequently gave rise to tensions between themselves and Whites, particularly poor working class Whites. This most often was followed by White supremacist legislation intended to impede their profit accumulation capacity and limit their political power. Such was the case in the early years of American dominion in Louisiana where US standards and racial attitudes were imposed.³⁷

The initial attempt to extirpate free Blacks in south Louisiana had consisted of the self-seeking efforts of the Louisiana Colonization Society, founded in 1817, to “repatriate” Free persons of color to their African homeland – and more specifically to Liberia, the U.S. colony on the west coast of Africa. During the late antebellum period the society's repatriation activities and propagandizing fell on a deaf ear since few second- and third-generation free blacks expressed any interest in leaving. Some Black leaders endorsed colonization; their argument was that Blacks were not wanted, and could never prosper in the racist society that was the United States. But their argument was not convincing. Indeed, the few Free Black who did take advantage of the “opportunity” left from northern states and Canada. In total only 300 free people of color emigrated from Louisiana to Liberia.³⁸ The resistance on the part of Louisiana Blacks came in spite of the rising racial tensions in the prairie parishes during the 1840s and 1850s.³⁹

As the national debate over slavery became more heated, relations between the races began to harden, until racial tensions were strained to the breaking point in the years preceding the Civil War. In the late 1850's, White vigilante groups began a campaign of terror in the Attakapas and Opelousas areas of Louisiana. Their intent was simple, to rid the area of its “Creole of Color” population. “Bands of armed vigilantes terrorized local colonies of “[sympathetic] White men and Negro “criminals,” often beating, banishing and even killing those who resisted.⁴⁰ While some fought the vigilantes, many other Free Blacks of the Attakapas and Opelousas districts were forced to abandon their homes, making their way to New Orleans. Among the first emigrants to reach the city were one hundred exiles from St. Landry Parish, survivors of the prairie genocide.⁴¹

Mexican Emigration Phase II: The Donato Colony

In the wake of these racial pogroms, a group of free Blacks from St. Landry Parish, Louisiana – most of who belonged to the extended Donato family -- set out for the Mexican state of Veracruz. This region had long been an area with a significant population of the African enslaved and people of mixed African ancestry. By 1829, slavery had been abolished in Mexico and the recently freed enslaved Africans and *pardos* (individuals of mixed ancestry) began to adapt to the new society. Under Spanish rule this region had a long history of interaction with the U.S. gulf coast, and, beginning in the late 1850's some Louisiana migrants sought to exploit those connections.

In late 1856 the idea of expatriating Free Blacks to Mexico reemerged. The Louisiana legislature, in conjunction with several other southern states proposed the buying of land from the Mexican government. These states tried to enlist the Federal government to negotiate the terms of purchase. Those who promoted the project depicted Mexico as particularly favorable for free Blacks since the soil and climate was suitable “to their natures.” In addition, they claimed “within a few years amalgamation with the Mexican people would take place” and thus “obliterate their origin.”⁴²

This last statement is symbolic of a recurring theme for the 19th century positivist view of race as a linear progression where the primitive barbarism of the African's "race" can only be "obliterated" by "amalgamation" with the idealized "Whiteness." Ironically, Mexico's notion of a *mestizo* society and culture embodied multiple contradictions – reflecting some of the same tensions as experienced in the U.S during the 19th century.⁴³

Although this particular plan did not materialize, a number of Free Blacks and *gens de couleur libre* took the initiative and moved south of the Mexican border. The vanguard of this colony consisted of about forty expatriate families from St. Landry Parish, led by members of the Donato clan, who, in 1857, reportedly carried with them "a considerable fortune and technical equipment which promised to make their experiment a success."⁴⁴ They reportedly founded a colony in the state of Veracruz. It is entirely possible that they actually joined an already existing settlement populated by their relatives and fellow *gens de couleur Libre* – possibly dating to the early 1800's or at least to 1832 – when young Lucien Donato would have left St. Landry Parish to join his uncle in Mexico.⁴⁵ In early July, 1857 a Mexico City newspaper, *El Siglo XIX*, noted the arrival of "more than forty families," who brought "a significant amount of capital, knowledge in different areas of agricultural cultivation, strong moral character, customs, courteousness, good dispositions with wishes and hopes for the progress of this industry."⁴⁶ Unfortunately, we know very little about the early life of the colony but we can construct a broad sketch from eyewitness and newspaper account of the period.

The colonists landed at Veracruz Llave (port) on-board the *Texas* in mid-July 1857 and, within a few days, set out for the fertile lands in the vicinity of Tlacotalpan, about 80 km from the port of Veracruz, on the banks of the "Popolopan" (Papaloapan) River --not far from "Goatzacaolcos" (or Coatzacaolcos).⁴⁷ It is not clear exactly how the colony was structured, either socially or politically, but by August, newspapers reported that the colonists of Papaloapan had increased to about 50 families, composed of about 100 individuals.⁴⁸ There were indications that some individuals were formerly enslaved Blacks, who accompanied the group, and by virtue of being in Mexico, were therefore free.

The group included people who were described as "farmers, engineers, mechanics and other types of workers -- with capital." The latter point was constantly reiterated as a justification for their presence in Mexico. It appears that after purchasing and clearing the land on the fertile floodplain of the Papaloapan River they immediately began to plant crops. Initial reports claim that many of the refugees from Louisiana concentrated on growing "Indian corn" for the local market, this being (along with beans) the main staple of the Mexican diet.⁴⁹ But evidently some of the wealthier colonists had more ambitious plans. The Mexico City newspaper *El Siglo* noted, "their principle work consists of the cultivation and processing of sugar cane." This pursuit required larger capital investments in machinery and hiring labor. "The captains (leaders) have at their disposal capital that was calculated at about 800,000 pesos; they have acquired machinery and have formed factories and are not waiting to bring their relatives or friends, but instead have begun to work."⁵⁰

Sugar had been an important crop during the Spanish colonial period and Veracruz was the main port of exportation. The Bourbon reforms of the late 18th century and the Haitian Revolution helped stimulate the production of sugar in the Veracruz area (Jalapa in particular), as it had done in Louisiana. However due to internal conflicts, British naval blockades, and a destructive invasion of locust and other disruptive events, after 1812 quantity and value of sugar exports had dropped: from 95, 016 *Arrobas* in 1811, to 12,236 in 1812 and continued its downward spiral thereafter.⁵¹ Interestingly, a byproduct of these events was the internal use of the darker, unrefined sugar (*Piloncillo*) and the production of rum by small mills in Jalapa. By the beginning of the Independence period, the main export market for the *aguardiente* had shifted from Seville to New Orleans -- thus reinforcing the circum-Caribbean connections.⁵²

In the period after the abolition of slavery and the readjustments in the Mexican economy, the Veracruz area continued to produce sugar but as late as the 1850's the total export still had not approached the volume of the Bourbon period.⁵³ The extent to which the new Louisiana immigrants impacted the production of sugar is unclear but what is fairly apparent is that at least some of the sugar plantations in the area were relatively large and well equipped - although sugar could be grown quite successfully on smaller farms - as had been done in Louisiana - with the use of "free" labor.⁵⁴ Many local Mexican officials and other interested parties expressed hope that "haciendas (plantations) will once again flourish" in the area and that the Donato colony would "serve as the base for the construction of a colony of industrious men." and that Mexico would soon see "producers arrive at the port of Tlacotalpam"⁵⁵

The colony produced sugar for the export market, while "Indian corn" was for consumption or sale locally at a small profit. It is also possible that the United States-owned *Mexican Extraordinary* claimed they were corn producers to devalue their contribution to the Veracruz economy.⁵⁶ Whatever scenario better describes their activities, according to local Mexican newspapers the new immigrants soon became so successful that other family members joined the colony. At this point, they claimed that "racial animosity" was not an issue in this area, which afforded them the opportunity to live free and prosper.⁵⁷ However, their presence in Mexico was not without complications. Soon after the group of forty arrived in July 1857, some resentment began to surface related to issues of land, property and "race relations."

Most historians of Louisiana's Black population, following the interpretations of Herbert Stryx, have assumed that the immigrant colonists met with resistance from local Mexicans and within a few years left the region. The foundation for this assumption was Stryx's interpretation of an article reprinted in the August 12, 1857 edition of the *New Orleans Daily Picayune*. According to Stryx:

Whether these colonists remained in their adopted land is uncertain since their Mexican neighbors looked upon such a population with strong suspicion. *The Mexican Extraordinary* in opposing the colony pointed out that although they had “diligently and successfully cultivated maize, in view of the history of Santo Domingo [meaning Saint Domingue or Haiti] and Jamaica and the nature of the African, the project augurs but poorly of the future of Mexico.”⁵⁸

What the author neglects to mention was that *The Mexican Extraordinary* (the original source of the Picayune article), a newspaper published in Mexico City, represented United States commercial and political interests, and therefore was “pro-slavery” and racist in its view of people of African descent. The editor of the *Extraordinary* noted that the colonists had bought the land that they work and “were so successful that they wrote to their friends in New Orleans, telling them of the great advantages held out to them in Mexico.” Their main fear was that many other Free Black families would follow them and that “since the negro is creature of imitation and not invention...they will degenerate...and [become] vicious...a nuisance and pest to society.”⁵⁹

In less than a week after the original editorial a number of papers, including two other Mexican newspapers, the *El Siglo* and *El Monitor*, and the French language paper *Trait d'Union* replied to the *Mexican Extraordinary* editorial. The *El Siglo* believed the “Negros character [was] sufficiently strong to build up a prosperous colony in Mexico.”⁶⁰ Again, a day later on August 6th, the editor of *Mexican Extraordinary* was forced to defend his editorial because the *El Siglo* reply had “came down” on them and “in a regular humanitarian style...strives to make us out a slavery propagandist.”⁶¹ On August 13 the editors of *Mexican Extraordinary* were attacked again, this time by the French language newspaper the *Trait d' Union*; that accused them of being pro-United States (pro-slavery), and thus anti-Mexican. The *Extraordinary* editor was forced to back down; claiming “as a journalist in Mexico we know no national interests but those of the country we are in.” They also note that their editorial “did not ask the government to put a stop to Negro colonization altogether. Such a proposition would be foolish,” but then rationalized that they considered “the building up of a negro [sic] colony in Mexico... worthy of some notice.”⁶²

This by no means ended the debate. *El Progreso*, a local Veracruz newspaper, joined in the attack on the *Extraordinary* and roundly criticized them for not understanding the importance of the new immigrants. In a parting shot at the U.S. interests represented by the *Extraordinary* (less than a decade after the American invasion and humiliation of Mexico) *El Progreso* commented that the colonists had come “fleeing from the “christianizing and civilizing” treatment of the Americans, for whom the Negro is a thing, not a person and declares them to be children, or who expels them if they are not slaves.”⁶³ They also joined the others critics in welcoming the new Black colony and their knowledge of agricultural production and “industriousness,” hoping that this would “enliven our local *Jarochos* (local *Afro-Veracruzanos*) and make them shake-off their great laziness.”⁶⁴

The last point reflected the dominant stereotypical attitudes toward the local Afro-Veracruzanos, only a generation removed from slavery. It appears fairly obvious that the editor of *El Progreso* hoped that the *gens de couleur libre* and the local *Afro castas* (literally African caste: i.e. Mexicans of mixed African, Indian and European/White blood) would help bring an “advanced civilization” to the area – notably their “large funds of valuable capital,” which they hoped would enhance land values.

In viewing this exchange it becomes apparent that while the local Mexican newspapers took the *Extraordinary* to task for its shortsightedness and racism, they nonetheless shared racial ambiguity in their editorials – one base on the notions of White supremacy and “Whiteness” as cultural capital. All parties still clung to the positivist notion of a hierarchy of race, which in Mexico was only slightly different than other part of the circum-Caribbean. The multiple layers of contradiction regarding “Whiteness” and “white privilege” viz a viz the *affranchis* (or *sang-meles*) in Saint-Domingue/ Haiti, *gens de couleur libre* in southeast Louisiana and the *Afro-castas* (i.e. -*Pardos and Mulattoes*) on gulf coast of Mexico was constantly being reproduced, with only slight modifications in the 19th century.

During the Spanish colonial period in Mexico there were six principal “racial” categories *White, Indian, Negro, Mestizo, Mulatto and Pardo*. According to Patrick Carroll, “Racial catalogers [mostly religious clerics and public notaries] did not assign designations on the basis of genetic background. They simply matched persons against popularly accepted somatic norms of the six recognized racial groups... (they) used three basic physical characteristics to define race. In order of significance these included skin color, beard thickness, and facial features.”⁶⁵ In describing the men and women of the Donato colony, *El Progreso* reported “peoples of these families are physically large (tall), as Blonde as the Irish [sic], and whose young have long beards, and none of us doubt that, knowing the African race /peoples, that they could pass for American children of white people.”⁶⁶ In very stereotypical language, it was also noted that the “old patriarchs” of those families were of a *Moreno* (brown) color, **yet** they were “very respectable in their appearance.” The women were described as “beautiful and delicate... with...tropical charm,” while the men were seen as “industrious, hard-working and peaceful.” The article goes on to justify their presence by saying that new émigrés “do not have from the colored race more than a trace of tint (in their skin) and are erased to the point that they are only four generations removed from their grandfathers being White.”⁶⁷ Thus to White Mexicans in the 19th century, even though independence and rising nationalism brought certain changes, they still depended on race, ethnicity and economic class as defining mechanism. Even though slavery had been abolished and racial mixing was fairly common, racism remained an important factor in differentiating class statue, and Whiteness (and degrees of Whiteness) was normalized and used to justify their elevated class position.⁶⁸ They could associate Whiteness with beauty, intelligence and industriousness – therefore wealth, and dull wittedness and Laziness with Blackness – hence poverty.

Conclusion

While the ultimate fate of this colony is not clear, since it disappeared from the pages of newspapers and historical record, most historians acknowledge the importance of such people of African descent in changing the political, economic, social and cultural nature of the Americas; however, what is often overlooked is the movement of these migrants throughout the “New World.” As demonstrated in the essay, they helped build regional economies of the “circum-Caribbean” socio-economic formation. In particular, the 18th and 19th centuries witnessed a “technical-racial diffusion took place in Cuba, Haiti, the Gulf Coast of Louisiana and Texas and Veracruz, Mexico.

Another equally important aspect of the experience of Black people was the emergence of diverse class and cultural interrelationships between and among the descendants of these “New World Africans.” This paper explored the activities of free Blacks and *gens de couleur libre* (or “Creoles of Color”) who left their homes in southwest Louisiana and migrated to Mexico -- in search of security and a better life for their families. The philosophical and legal definition of “whiteness” conditioned the interactions between people of African ancestry (both enslaved and free) and White Louisianans and Mexicans (and various subdivisions within each of these groups)- as a way of illuminating the complex set of socioeconomic relations that evolved between these diverse classes and cultures within the confines of the circum-Caribbean space. In 18th century Saint Domingue, 19th century Louisiana and to a degree the Caribbean coast of Mexico, “Whiteness” became the basis of racialized privilege – a type of status in which “white” racial identity became the basis on which individuals received benefits from society. The interactions between individuals of different class, caste and racial categories can only be understood in this context.

These experiences drawn from the circum-Caribbean demonstrate that on the critical issue of identity, free Blacks, *gens de couleur libre*, and the emerging “Creole” identity were dialectically and historically interconnected and socially constructed within a set of political, economic and cultural dynamics. The contradictions of antebellum and reconstruction policies and attitudes in the United States and Mexico required the remaking of racial identity to conform and justify class position. In order to solidify ones class position, there was the need to distance oneself from slavery and enslaved statue. To facilitate this one had to consciously or unconsciously move away from the subservient and dominated “race” which had been associated with a particular class position, and *adopt*, and then *adapt* the worldview of the dominant class. As A. Sivananden has noted: “The whole structure of white racism is built no doubt on economic exploitation, but it is cemented with white culture. In other words, the racism inherent in white society is determined economically, but defined culturally.”⁶⁹

Finally, the plight of a small, and somewhat marginalized group of *gens de couleur libre*, and their interactions with White Louisianans and Mexicans illuminates the complex set of socioeconomic and “race” relations that evolved between these diverse cultures and classes. The long-term impact of these relations is not entirely clear, but their migration was truly a “motor of social change and the leaven of culture” in the Louisiana prairies and Caribbean coast of Mexico in 19th century.

Afterwards

In 2002, I made a research trip to Tlacotalpan with a close colleague, Professor Miguel Tinker Salas, a specialist in the History of Mexico and particularly questions of race and identity.⁷⁰ We discovered very little in the way of evidence about the *gens de couleur libre* who had reportedly settled in the area over a century earlier. We visited the local library and the *Casa de Cultura* where we interviewed the curator and several other individuals, including the town’s oldest living resident, a 90 year old woman who ironically had lived part of her childhood in New Orleans. When asked about the existence of descendants of “Blacks” in the area she was unable to provide any enlightenment on our research.

In addition, my colleague and I also did research in the town of Gutierrez Zamora, 300 miles north of Vera Cruz port where another community of *gens de couleur libre* had established a colony in the 1870’s. We interviewed the descendants of the original colonists and toured the local cemetery where we discovered gravestones with dates of death and places of origin: “la Louisiane” (Some bore the name of the parish and/or town). We could find no direct connection between Gutierrez Zamora (or *Cabezas* as it was originally known) and the Donato Colony in Tlacotalpan, nor the Eureka colony founded by Louis Nelson Foucher (near Tampico, Mexico)⁷¹

Several years later, Professor Tinker Salas visited Tlacotalpan and continued asking about the “disappeared” African population. Quite by accident he met a gentleman who bore a striking resemblance to the author and asked him about his background. To my colleagues surprise the man mentioned that part of his ancestry came from “Frenchmen” who has settled in the area generations back. He showed the professor family photographs and it was clear that these individuals were descended from “Frenchman” of color from the north. The implication was that these individuals were quite likely the *gens de couleur libre* who had migrated from Louisiana in the 1850’s. It also seems likely that upon their arrival, or in subsequent years, recognizing that claiming “Whiteness” or “Frenchness” was a decided advantage to their acceptance into the community. This is all impressionistic data that should be investigated more thoroughly in the future.

Notes

¹ Thomas Fiehrer, "From La Tortue to La Louisiane: An Unfathomed Legacy," pg. 1 in Carl Brasseaux and Glenn R. Conrad, eds. *The Road to Louisiana: The Saint-Domingue Refugees 1792-1809*.(Lafayette, 1992).

² *Mexican Extraordinary*, July 30, 1857.

³ Thomas Fiehrer, "The African Presence in Colonial Louisiana: An Essay on the Continuity of Caribbean Culture." Pg. 5 In Robert R. Macdonald, et al, *Louisiana's Black Heritage*, (Baton Rouge, 1979).

⁴ Virginia Dominguez, *White By Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*, (New Brunswick, 1997), p. 104).

⁵ Glenn R. Conrad and Ray F. Lucas, *White Gold: A Brief History of the Louisiana Sugar Industry 1795-1995*, (Lafayette, 1995), p4, Davis, Wall.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6. The credit for developing this hybrid sugar cane is usually given to the planter Etienne Boré, but the credit should be equally shared with Antoine Morin, a sugar-maker from Saint Domingue who – while working for Boré in 1794-5, developed the hybrid cane.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8 Originally they only asked for "the isle of Orleans.

⁸ See Gilbert C. Din, *The Canary Islanders of Louisiana*, (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 1988). Carl Brasseaux, *Creoles of Color in the Bayou Country*, (Jackson; University Press of Mississippi, 1994). James H. Dormon, *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South*, (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1996).

⁹ Fiehrer, Culture, p5.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.4.

¹² Brasseaux and Conrad, eds. *The Road to Louisiana*, p vii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.xvii.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. xi-xii.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. xiii.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. xvi.

¹⁷ Harris, *Whiteness as Property*, p. 1712. Harris mentions Myrdal's work on this phenomenon. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, (New York, 1944).

¹⁸ Harris, *Whiteness as Property*, 1713. She also indicates that Whiteness had been established and protected by the law as actual property, thus affording whiteness legal status. Whiteness was moved from "privileged identity to a vested interest. The law's construction of whiteness defined and affirmed critical aspects of identity (who is white) of privilege (what benefits accrue to that status); and , of property (what legal entitlements arise from that status)". [1725] Also see the classic work by Oliver C. Cox, *Caste, Class and Race*, (New York, 1959), pp. 425-31.

¹⁹ Fiehrer, *Culture*, p. 20.

²⁰ Ibid., p25.

²¹ Harris, *Whiteness as Property*, p. 1714.

²² Ibid.

²³ For the island of Hispanola see Eric Williams, *Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean*, (New York 1984), chapter Four.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 25 the Saint Domingue enslaved represented almost a third of the 1810 enslaved population of New Orleans and 10 percent of Orleans Territory.

²⁵ Brasseaux, *Bayou Country*, .ppg. 42. See also Mathe Allain, "Slave Policies in French Louisiana," *Louisiana History* 21 (1980).

²⁶ Donald Everett, "Free Persons of Color in Colonial Louisiana," *Louisiana History*, 7 (1966): 21-50.

²⁷ Claude Oubre and Roscoe Leonard, "Free and Proud," p73, in Vaughn Baker and Jean T. Kreamer, *Louisiana Tapestry: The Ethnic Weave of St. Landry Parish*, (Univ. of Louisiana at Lafayette; 1983).

²⁸ Brasseaux, *Bayou Country*, .ppg. 68-69.

²⁹ A.Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance*, (Pluto Press 1991) p. 94
“Thus while “the whole structure of white racism (or white supremacist capitalist patriarchy) [was] built no doubt on economic exploitation,...it [was] cemented with white culture. In other words, racism inherent in white society [was] determined economically, but defined culturally.”

³⁰ Nicholls, *Dessalines to Duvalier*, p. 27.

³¹ Oubre and Leonard, “Free and Proud,” pg. 75.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 78. At the time of his death in 1848, Martin Donatto owned 88 enslaved.

³⁴ Claude Oubre, “St. Landry’s Gens de Couleur Libre: The Impact of War and Reconstruction,” in Baker and Kreamer, eds. *Louisiana Tapestry*, p.83. See also Conrad A. Auzenne, *The Auzenne, Donato, Frilot, Lemelle and Meullion Families*, Unpublished manuscript. P 155.

³⁵ Conrad P. Kottak, *Cultural Anthropology: Appreciating Cultural Diversity*, (McGraw Hill, 2010). The so-called one-drop rule, while practiced in the antebellum period, did not become law until 1910 (Tennessee). Later similar laws were passed in several other states, including Louisiana.

³⁶ . H. E. Sterkx, *The Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Louisiana*, (Rutherford, 1972), p. 285.

³⁷ H. Hoetink, *Slavery and Race Relations in the Americas*, (New York, Harper-Collins, 1973), p. 38.

³⁸ Sterkx, *Free Negro*, p. 295.

³⁹ Brasseaux, *Bayou Country*, p. 81.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

⁴¹ Given the level of violence and terror in the Attakapas and Opelousas areas of Louisiana many “Creole of Color” were encouraged to migrate to Haiti by P.E. Desdunes, the Haitian consul in New Orleans. However after a few years a number returned to New Orleans and subsequently set sail to Mexico. See Rudolphe Lucien Desdunes, *Our People and Our History*, (Baton Rouge, 1973), p. 112.

⁴² Sterkx, *Free Negro*, p. 296.

⁴³ One of the best discussions of this topic is Guillermo Batalla and Philip Dennis. *Mexico Profundo: Reclaiming A Civilization*. (University of Texas Press, 1996).

⁴⁴ Ibid., p 297. See also Alexandre Barde, *Histoire des Comites de Vigilance aux Attakapas* (Hahnville, 1861), p.337 and Brasseaux, *Bayou Country*, p. 82.

⁴⁵ Marie Guillory married Juan Mateos of Vera Cruz, in 1808.

⁴⁶ *El Siglo XIX* , "Immigracion," July 15, 1857).

⁴⁷).Ibid. The Papaloapan River originates in the mountains north of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and empties into the Gulf of Mexico near Coatzacoalcos.

⁴⁸ .Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Mexican Extraordinary*, July 30, 1857.

⁵⁰ *El Siglo XIX* “La Raza Negra,” August 8, 1857.

⁵¹ Patrick Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz*, (Austin, 1991) p.165. *El Siglo XIX*, “Calamidades,” July 1, 1857.

⁵² Carroll, *Veracruz*, p.57.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Conrad and Lucas, *White Gold*, p29.

⁵⁵ *El Siglo XIX*, "Immigracion," July 15, 1857.

⁵⁶ *Mexican Extraordinary*, July 30, 1857. But sugar production required a more complex scheme.

⁵⁷ Sterkx, *Free Negro*, p. 296.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Sterkx paraphrased from *New Orleans Daily Picayune* August 12, 1857.

⁵⁹ *Mexican Extraordinary*, July 30, 1857.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, “Colonization,” August 4, 1857 See also *El Siglo XIX* “La Raza Negra,” August 5, 1857.

⁶¹ *Mexican Extraordinary*, “The Negros,” August 6, 1857.

⁶² *Ibid.*, “The Negros Again,” August 13, 1857.

⁶³ *El Siglo XIX*, “La Colonia Del Papaloapan,” August 27, 1857

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Carroll, *Veracruz*, p.113.

⁶⁶ *El Siglo XIX*, “La Colonia Del Papaloapan,” August 27, 1857.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Carroll, *Veracruz*, pp. 142-3.

⁶⁹ A. Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger*, p. 94.

⁷⁰ Miguel Tinker Salas, *In the Shadow of the Eagles: Sonora and the Transformation of the Border During the Porfiriato* (University of California Press, 1997).

⁷¹ Charles Kinzer: “The Tio Family: Four Generations of New Orleans Musicians, 1814-1933.” PhD Dissertation, Louisiana State University. 1993. Also see Mary Gehman, *The Free People of Color of New Orleans: An Introduction*, 2009.

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