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WHEEL OF MISFORTUNE: THE INTERCOLONIAL SLAVE TRADE BETWEEN THE CARIBBEAN AND FRENCH COLONIAL LOUISIANA

In 1765 New Orleans, French colonial authorities faced a serious dilemma when the ship *Roue de Fortune* unloaded twenty-odd enslaved Black men, women, and children transported from Saint-Pierre, Martinique. On the one hand, the Caribbean slave trade had become an invaluable source of labor for Louisiana's fledgling plantation economy, which had long stopped outfitting transatlantic slave voyages from Africa. While intercolonial commerce often violated imperial regulations, enslaved workers were arguably more valuable and less scrutinized than any other contraband.
On the other hand, Louisiana's administrators feared the rebellious influence of West Indian arrivals so much that they forbid imports of enslaved Creoles from Saint-Domingue, although not the transshipment of "saltwater" African captives.

Ultimately, the *Roue de Fortune*'s human cargo was allowed to be sold at auction, yet officials extended the ban to all the Antilles in the aftermath. As they examined each captive to assess their character, their origins, and the motive of their deportation, Louisiana's colonial authorities also produced unusual records that can provide a glimpse into their diverse experiences and perspectives. This paper analyzes this incident in the context of the still underestimated impact of the small-scale intercolonial slave trade between French colonial Louisiana and the Antilles.

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By 1765, France had officially ceded New Orleans and most of Louisiana to Spain following its defeat in the Seven Year War, although the effective transfer would only take place a few years later. After a half-century of French colonization, Louisiana was still much less populated than England's North American settlements or France's own in Canada and the Caribbean. Throughout its relatively short life, this immense colony, which claimed the whole Mississippi Basin–almost a third of today's continental United States–remained massively and chronically undermanned and underfunded, a peripheral colony that was arguably a low priority for its metropolitan government. The French had built a modest plantation economy in the Lower Mississippi, which exported commodity crops produced by enslaved labor, chiefly tobacco, indigo, and rice. But Louisiana's transatlantic commerce paled in comparison with sugar islands like Martinique and Saint-Domingue, which it supplied with timber and foodstuffs.

According to current estimates from the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, 23 voyages only reached Louisiana from 1719 to the end of the French regime in 1769, when they disembarked 6,235 African captives.[1] Over the same period, Caribbean colonies such as Martinique, Saint- Domingue, and Jamaica received respectively 15 times, 44 times, and 68 times as many enslaved Africans (figure 1). Beside structural problems related to its geographical isolation and slow demographic and economic growth, the main cause of these limited arrivals was the early abandonment of the African slave trade

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[1] Slave Voyages: The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database. For overviews of the Atlantic slave trade to Louisiana, see Daniel H. Usner, "From African Captivity to American Slavery: The Introduction of Black Laborers to Colonial Louisiana." Louisiana History 20, no. 1 (1979): 25–48; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana the Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Thomas N. Ingersoll, "The Slave Trade and the Ethnic Diversity of Louisiana's Slave Community," *Louisiana History* 37, no. 2 (1996): 133–61.

to Louisiana by the commercial *Compagnie des Indes* ("Company of the Indies"). The *Compagnie* had been sending slave ships from West Africa to the Gulf Coast since 1719, but this traffic came to a halt in 1731 after the colony's administration was returned to the Crown.

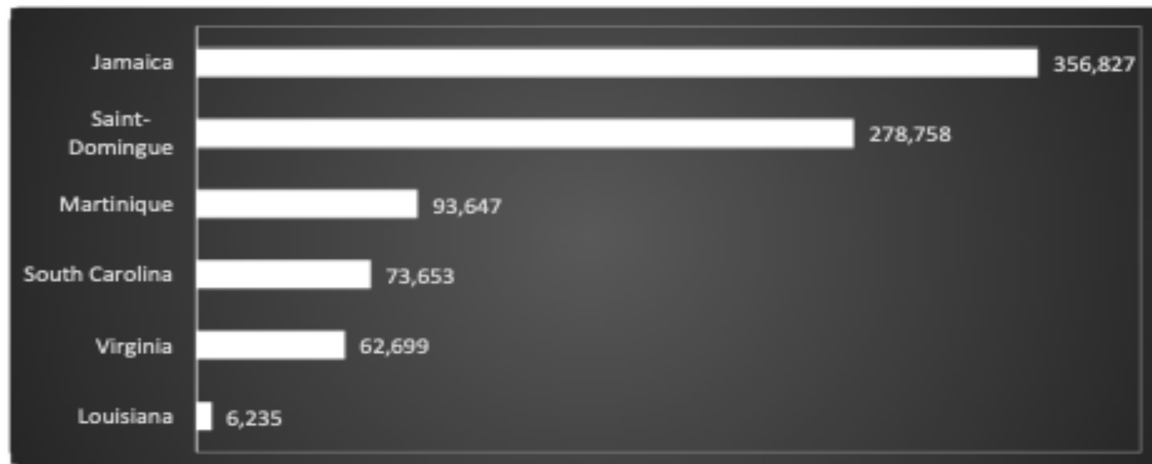

Figure 1. African captives landed by transatlantic voyages, 1719-1769. Data from Slave Voyages: The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database.

A convergence of Indigenous and African resistance, which threatened the colonists' access to land and enslaved labor, shattered the *Compagnie*'s ambitions for Louisiana to become a "second Saint-Domingue," where plantation agriculture thrived.[2] While the 1729 uprising of the Natchez Indians destroyed the colony's richest tobacco plantations, African rebellions around the Atlantic made certain routes and destinations, such as the Gulf Coast, unprofitable or outright impractical for the slave trade. Metropolitan administrators of the Compagnie explicitly justified Louisiana's retrocession to the King

[2] Marc Antoine Caillot, "Relation du voyage de la Louisianne ou Nouvlle France," Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, MSS 596, fol. 108.

and the necessity to shift its commercial focus toward East Asia by stressing the cost of financial and military losses in North America and West Africa.[3]

Successive failures to revive Louisiana's transatlantic slave trade in the following decades showed that it faced deep-rooted obstacles. While the opening of the African slave trade to private merchants caused it to flourish in the eighteenth-century, this boom hardly affected the Gulf Coast, which received less than 2 percent of captives transported to French American colonies from 1701 to 1763—and almost none after 1731.[4] The King's decree enacting the retrocession of Louisiana to the Crown, which declared "the commerce of Louisiana free to all its subjects," did not explicitly mention the slave trade.[5] The omission was especially striking because the *Compagnie* had asked to retain the privilege of importing 500 African captives per year, a number roughly equivalent to average arrivals during its tenure. In practice, individual merchants and colonists planning to ship enslaved Africans through the middle passage had to navigate a complex system of licensing fees and bureaucratic authorizations. Louisianans could only organize two transatlantic voyages in the next 40 years, in 1737 and 1743, and only the latter reached New Orleans, where it landed 190 captives from Senegambia. The 1737 venture ended

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[3] "Extrait du registre général des délibérations prises dans les assemblées générales d'administration," 1731-01-24/3 [Year-month-day/document number], Records of the Superior Council, Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans (RSC); Erin Greenwald, "Company Towns and Tropical Baptisms: From Lorient to Louisiana on a French Atlantic Circuit" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2011), 210–16.

[4] Kenneth J. Banks, *Chasing Empire across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713-1763* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 35–36.

[5] "Arrêt du conseil d'Etat concernant la rétrocession faite à Sa Majesté par la Compagnie des Indes de la concession de la Louisiane et du pays des Illinois," 23 January 1731, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Site François-Mitterrand, Département droit, économie, politique, F-21114, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b86025746 (quote); "Extrait du registre général des délibérations, 1731-01-24/3, RSC.

abruptly in Martinique with the ship captain's death, before he could even cross the Atlantic.[6]

Unsuccessful efforts to resuscitate the Atlantic slave trade to the Gulf Coast were numerous. Proposals or *mémoires* accumulated in vain upon the desks of bureaucrats reluctant to subsidize either the transportation of Africans or their purchase by Louisiana's credit-poor colonists.[7] The most comprehensive effort was a mid-century scheme to expand tobacco plantations submitted by André Fabry de la Bruyère, an experienced administrator who had served as a clerk in Louisiana for about fifteen years. Fabry presented at least five different versions of his plan, all of which relied on unprecedented arrivals of enslaved Black laborers to generate steadily rising profits. His proposal encapsulated two problematic assumptions shared by nearly all similar projects. First, its economic calculations automatically translated capital investments into a proportional influx of enslaved workers, regardless of the hazards and difficulties that had caused the interruption of the slave trade in the first place. While Louisiana had received less than 200 enslaved Africans in the past twenty years, Fabry's "table of tobacco's progress"

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[6] Contract between Jacques de Coustilhas and Georges Amelot, 1737-04-24/1; Arnaud Vigeau de Grandmaison v. Coustilhas; 1738-02-26/4; Coustilhas heirs v. Gérard Péry, RSC, 1739-09-27/2; Bienville and to the Minister. 24 March 1742, Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer, Aix-en-Provence (ANOM), C13: Correspondance à l'arrivée en provenance de la Louisiane, A27, fol. 5; Vaudreuil to the Minister, 25 August 1743, ANOM, C13, A28, fol. 82.

[7] Ingersoll, "The Slave Trade," 136–38. For a sample of those proposals, see "Proposition de la Compagnie des Indies a la Marine du Roy" and attached draft of a response (undated, 1732?), Centre d'Accueil et de Recherche des Archives Nationales, Paris (CARAN), Fonds Marine (MAR), B3: Lettres reçues, 354, fols. 246-247 and 244-245; Salmon to the Minister, 22 October 1734, ANOM, C13, A19, fol. 88; "Proposition de la Compagnie de porter des nègres à la Louisiane," CARAN, MAR, G: Documents divers, 51, fol. 354; "La Louisiane: Mémoire de M. Gradis fils sur cette colonie," 21 May 1748, C13, A32, fol. 248-250; Rasteau fils to Minister, 7 April 1750 and 18 August 1750, MAR, B3, 500, fols. 82-89; "Mémoire sur le transport du Sénégal a la Louisianne de 250 têtes de noirs," attached to a letter dated 15 September 1750, Service Historique de la Défense at Rochefort (SHD-R), Bureau des colonies de Rochefort (1R), 46; Kerlerec to the Minister, 19 June 1752, ANOM, C13, A36, fol. 149; Colomb to the Minister, 1754, ANOM, C13, A38, fols 236-242.

presented in his 1750 memorandum estimated that over 10,000 captives could be imported during the next decade, which would have doubled its Black population (figure 2). Likewise, Fabry projected the growth of tobacco production, exports, and profits as directly proportionate to the numbers of African bondspeople, as if the actions of enslaved workers and other human factors did not condition the output of plantation labor.[8]

Table de La progression du Tabac

Année	Anciens Negres travaillans	Produit de leur Travail	Nouveaux Negres a Introduire	Produit de leur Travail	Total des Negres au Travail	Total du produit annuel
1750	500	800000	160	......	500	800000
1751	500	800000	211	256000	660	1056000
1752	500	800000	278	337600	871	1393600
1753	500	800000	367	444800	1149	1838400
1754	500	800000	481	587200	1516	2405600
1755	500	800000	635	769600	1997	3175200
1756	500	800000	838	1016000	2632	4191200
1757	500	800000	1106	1340800	3470	5532000
1758	500	800000	1464	1769600	4576	7321600
1759	500	800000	1932	2342400	6040	9664000
1760	500	800000	2551	3091200	7972	12755200
1761	500	800000	......	4081600	10523	16836800

Figure 1. This "table of tobacco's progress" lists projections of annual slave imports (fourth column) and profits (last) for 1750-1761. Attached to Memorandum on the introduction of slaves and tobacco cultivation in Louisiana, C13, A34, fol. 392.

[8] Memorandum on the introduction of slaves and tobacco cultivation in Louisiana, ANOM, C13, A34, fol. 392. For different versions of Fabry's plan, see "Examen des moyens et du temps necessaire pour mettre la colonie de la Louisiane en état de fournir à la consummation de tabac en France," ca. 1749, Centre des Archives Diplomatiques, La Courneuve (CAD), Mémoires et Documents (MD), Amérique, 2, fols. 230-232; "Mémoire concernant un projet d'établissement en Louisiane pour la culture du tabac et le commerce du bois par Fabry," 1 April 1749, ANOM, C13, A33, fols. 196-220; "Mémoire concernant l'introduction de nègres et la culture du tabac en Louisiane," 1750, ANOM, C13, A34, fol. 393. Other individuals may have collaborated on those documents, but Fabry was the only known author. Although he submitted his elaborate projections for plantation agriculture after returning to France, it would be surprising for an official familiar with the American context to share such unrealistic schemes with so much confidence unless they reflected a widespread mindset among colonial boosters.

The unbroken slave supply that men like Fabry imagined in the abstract contrasted with the messy realities of purchasing and transporting enslaved people around the Atlantic. Moreover, Louisiana's geographic position on the Gulf Coast meant that nearly all incoming ships stopped over in the West Indies, where the healthiest and most valuable slave cargoes were usually delivered.[9] Continuing across the Gulf of Mexico and up the Mississippi delta exposed slavers to further risks of losing their precious human cargo to disease, shipwrecks, piracy, and mutiny. Because ocean-going vessels were unable to reach New Orleans, the colony's main slave market, through the "back door" provided by the shallow waters of Lake Pontchartrain, they had no choice but to navigate its "front door," the 100-mile river section meandering from its mouth to the capital. This hazardous journey could require up to six weeks, or as long as a reaching the Antilles from Europe or West Africa under favorable conditions.[10] One of Fabry's own documents estimated the additional costs associated with those risks by suggesting that African captives should be sold for 12.5 percent more in Louisiana than in the West Indies.[11] Not only was carrying slaves to Louisiana hazardous and expensive, but it also reduced profits because its colonists exported fewer valuable commodities and had less access to the credit required to purchase enslaved workers than their Caribbean counterparts.[12]

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[9] Greenwald, "Company Towns," 116n228.

[10] Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire French Colonial New Orleans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 108.

[11] "Mémoire concernant l'introduction de nègres," 1750, ANOM, C13, A34, fol. 395.

[12] To illustrate the enormous amount of debt generated by slave imports, Alexandre Dubé cites the example of the *Concorde*, a ship captured by the British Navy during the Seven Years' War. While the *Concorde* had completed 18 trips to Louisiana and the Antilles since selling a large cargo of Africans in Saint-Domingue a few years earlier, the export profits from all those voyages only amounted to 80 percent of what the buyers of this human cargo still owed. Alexandre Dubé, "Les biens publics: culture politique de la Louisiane française 1730-1770" (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 2009), 271.

“It would have been irrational to carry slaves to Louisiana,” concludes Thomas Ingersoll, “except under royal orders and special subsidies as the Compagnie des Indes had done in the early years.”[13]

Figure 3. “A new map of the River Mississipi from the sea to Bayagoulas,” ca. 1761. Norman B. Leventhal Map Center Collection, Boston Public Library, https://collections.leventhalmap.org/search/commonwealth:wd376444x

As it became increasingly clear that the transatlantic slave trade to the Gulf Coast would not resume, colonists and administrators turned to the Caribbean to supply them with enslaved Black labor. The scarce resources of most Louisianans, the West Indian slaveholders’ own labor needs, and French imperial regulations of inter-colonial commerce—however loosely enforced—made this regional trade a small-scale business. The new intra-American slave trade database, which recently adds 31,707 intercolonial voyages to its transatlantic counterpart, includes only three headed to French colonial

[13] Ingersoll, “The Slave Trade,” 137.

Louisiana, where they landed a meager 43 captives between 1737 and 1748.[14] Although the database itself was first developed for the Anglo-American slave trade and remains a work in progress, these low numbers also reflect the covert and shadowy nature of slave imports to the Gulf Coast. One Jamaican schooner, for instance, sought to smuggle the largest of these shipments by masquerading as a flag of truce, or *parlementaire*, at the end of King George's War (1744-1748). Yet colonial authorities seized and sold the clandestine human cargo found onboard with French and Spanish prisoners.[15] Other ships imported more Caribbean slaves under the cover of diplomatic missions, maritime accidents, and privateering—all common smuggling strategies—with varying levels of government complicity. [16] This was how 122 men, women, and children transported from Angola, then captured from a British prize vessel, ended up auctioned in 1758 New Orleans, where they reached high prices due to wartime inflation and years of unfulfilled demand for enslaved labor. [17]

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[14] By contrast, the database lists 146 intercolonial voyages to Louisiana between 1770 and 1808, mostly from English Caribbean colonies like Jamaica. The volume of the intra-American slave trade to the Gulf Coast expanded dramatically in the following decades, with 3,235 voyages listed between 1809 and 1860. With the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, the growing needs for slave labor on cotton and sugar plantations were almost exclusively filled by the domestic slave trade, and nearly all voyages listed came from other US states until the Civil War. Figures from Slave Voyages, Intra-American Slave Trade Database, https://www.slavevoyages.org/american/database. See also Gregory E. O'Malley, *Final Passages: The Intercolonial Slave Trade of British America, 1619-1807* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

[15] Intra-American Slave Trade Database, voyage no. 102574: *Rattan Packet*; Vaudreuil and Dauberville to Maurepas, 10 November 1748, ANOM, C13, A32, 20-21; D'Auberville to the Minister, 10 November 1748, ANOM, C13, A32, fol. 200. This might be the same "shipload" of captives from Jamaica mentioned by a New Orleans planter in 1749. See "Louisiana 1717 to 1751," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1923): 567.

[16] Nancy M. Surrey, *The Commerce of Louisiana during the French Régime, 1699-1763* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916), 456–59; Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 117, 129; Dubé, "Les biens publics," 328–29; Banks, *Chasing Empire*, 278–79.

[17] Plas to Rochemore, 7 July 1758, CARAN, MAR, B4: Campagnes, fols. 89-90; Rochemore to the Minister, 27 September-22 October 1758, ANOM, C13, A40, fols. 189-190.

Many more arrivals from the Antilles resulted from individual transfers that are equally difficult to estimate. While some slaveholders relocated to Louisiana with their human property, many others sold troublesome bondspeople as a punishment or those considered "refuse," i.e. undesirable due to sickness, age, or injury, to acquire more productive hands. This small-scale intra-American traffic undoubtedly provided a welcome alternative supply of slave labor in the last decades of the French regime, but it also raised alarms among Louisiana's slaveholders that their Caribbean counterparts used this trade to dispose of unfit or unruly individuals.[18] By 1755, this traffic was significant enough for Louisiana governor Billouart de Kerlérec to denounce the corrupting influence of those "sent here daily from Saint-Domingue and Martinique."[19] Kerlérec's dramatic plea to ban further imports went unheeded until the end of the Seven Year's War, when the *Superior Council, fearing the contagion of the slave unrest that shook the Caribbean, prohibited the entry of slaves from Saint-Domingue.[20] Even then, however,

[18] For some documented examples, see Seignette Dujardin to Rasteau, 1739-02-04/3; Judicial sale of slaves, 1739-03-03/1; Slave sale by André Gerbe to Barbin, 1740-05-19/1; Judicial sale of slaves, 1748-02-08/2; Petition of Triere, 1751-99-99/1 [sic]; Petition of Gaillardie, 1769-02-24/5, RSC; Slave sale by Jacques de Coustilhas to Petit de Livilliers, 19 January 1738, New Orleans Notarial Archives, Notary Nicolas Henri, box II, folder 3; Michel to the Minister, 23 September 1752, ANOM, C13, A36, fols. 274-275; A. Baillardel and A. Prioult, eds., *Le chevalier de Pradel; vie d'un colon français en Louisiane au XVIIIe siécle d'après sa correspondance et celle de sa famille.* (Paris: Maisonneuve frères, 1928), 224–25, 252, 319. See also John Clark, *New Orleans 1718-1812: An Economic History* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 1982), 23–25, 128–34; Cécile Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans: Empire, Race, and the Making of a Slave Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2019), 75–78, 777–78.

[19] Kerlérec to the Minister, 26 June 1755, ANOM, C13, A39, fols. 12-13.

[20] This fear of black rebellion was sparked by a series of events that initiated what Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker" described as "a new wave of slave resistance" in the 1760s, notably the alleged conspiracy to poison whites in Saint-Domingue, named after its executed Maroon leader François Makandal (1758), Tacky's war in Jamaica (1760-1761), and the Berbice uprising in Guyana (1763). See Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 224 (quote); Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 61–72; Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2005), 51–57; Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 106–7; Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2020); Alvin O. Thompson,

the Council sought to address safety concerns without "preventing Louisiana's inhabitants from profiting from the negroes that can be transported to them." [21] Their decree therefore targeted only those "domiciled" or permanently residing in Saint-Domingue, as opposed to Africans taken from slave ship cargoes.[22] Nonetheless, enslaved men and women transported from the Antilles featured increasingly often in judicial records: between 1764 and 1767, one third of enslaved men and women who mentioned their geographic origins in court claimed a West Indian background.

The 1765 examination of 16 Black adults brought from Martinique by the brig *La Roue de Fortune* reveals the continued vitality of this intercolonial slave trade. By shedding light on the identities and circumstances of those exiles, it also proves the anxiety of Louisiana officials to have been largely unfounded. Before allowing their sale, the Superior Council interrogated each captive to assess their character, their origins, and the motive of their deportation.[23] This was a heterogenous group. The adults ranged from 16 to 50 years old, 30 on average.[24] All came from the city of Saint-Pierre, a well-known hub for illegal transshipments, but only eight introduced themselves as "creoles from

"The Berbice Revolt 1763-64," in *Themes in African-Guyanese History*, ed. Winston F. McGowan, James G. Rose and David A. Granger (London: Hansib, 2009), 80; Marjoleine Kars, *Blood on the River: A Chronicle of Mutiny and Freedom on the Wild Coast* (New York: The New Press, 2020).

[21] "Extrait des registres des audiences du Conseil Supérieur de la Louisiane," 1763-07-09/2, RSC.

[22] This distinction between the licit transhipment of "saltwater" captives transported from Africa and banned imports of Creole slaves became a common feature of the inter-American slave trade during the Age of Revolution. See for instance Matt D. Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle Against Atlantic Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 51–52.

[23] Petition of La Frenière, 1765-11-12/3, "Procès-verbal de visite de plusieurs nègres," 1765-11-13-/1, Auction sale of slaves from Martinique, 1765-12-03/3, RSC. The exact number of captives landed by the *Roue de Fortune* is unclear as it varies across court documents, which do not count children consistently either. The petition introducing the case mentioned 21 men, women, and children, the court interrogations 16 adults with 3 children, and the account of their sale 18 adults and 5 children.

[24] Most of the personal information about the captives from the *Roue de Fortune* is compiled from "Procès-verbal de visite de plusieurs nègres," 1765-11-13-/1, RSC.

Martinique."[25] Seven identified with an African nation, kingdom, or region (Mina, Congo, Arada, Guinea), which was probably their birthplace. One man recently arrived in the Antilles had to speak through an interpreter since he knew no French "for being *bossal*," i.e. an unacculturated African.

At least five of the women among them were mothers, although only two had some children with them. The 48-year-old Catherine, also known as Catain, added without being prompted that she had "made 14 children of whom six were alive." When asked how long she had lived in Martinique, another woman named Jeannette claimed to have had six children aged up to 14 years. Such assertions of motherhood served to stress the Creole identity of these women, as well as the painful uprooting caused by their deportation. A third mother, a Congolese woman named Amaranthe, was not identified as such in the transcript of her examination. "During her interrogations at the jail and in what she repeats every day," however, she "declared having a daughter named Colassille about three years old" on the island. Invoking the prohibition from selling enslaved parents apart from their prepubescent children, the Frenchman who bought Amaranthe withheld the payment for her purchase until her daughter be delivered to him.[26]

Nearly all the prisoners belonged to different slaveholders and their occupations reflected their urban life in Saint-Pierre: half of them told the Council that they worked as domestic servants or street peddlers, but none mentioned farming. Most had been imprisoned in Saint-Pierre, some for months, before being shipped to Louisiana. Yet

[25] Kenneth J. Banks, "Official Duplicity: The Illicit Slave Trade of Martinique, 1713-1763," in *The Atlantic Economy during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: Organization, Operation, Practice, and Personnel*, ed. Peter A. Coclanis (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 237.

[26] Petition of Maison, 1765-12-06/2, RSC.

others had been directly led onboard by force or deception. Ironically though, perhaps the only trait shared by all sixteen captives was that they had *not* been convicted of any serious crime (*repris de justice*). The proof lied in their adamant protestations but also on their skin: the surgeon who stripped their bodies to inspect them found whipping scars by the owners of three prisoners, but none of the branding marks or mutilations inflicted on slaves condemned for theft, assault, or desertion (*marronage*).

Based on their testimonies, all but two of the Afro-Creoles from the *Roue de Fortune* provided a clear explanation for their exile. Six mentioned a sickness or injury that crippled their productivity, and another three admitted being unable or unwilling to work to their owner's satisfaction. More surprisingly, four suggested that their owners or their owners' partners sold them away for deeply personal reasons—to punish and eliminate a romantic or sexual rival. An equal number blamed their exile on financial motives—their owners had too much debt or expected easy profits from the sale. Two creole men clearly stated that the high demand for slave labor in Louisiana made them especially valuable to its white colonists. Michel, aged 30, declared having "heard his master say negroes here were sold at the price of gold, which was why he sent him to jail" for transportation to the Gulf Coast. Hyacinthe's female owner also had him incarcerated for months until the captain of the *Roue de Fortune* asked "what she was doing with a Negro in prison, all she had to do was to send him to the Mississippi where [buyers] were not as picky, and for the value of this one she could buy three others in Martinique."[27]

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[27] "Procès-verbal de visite," 1765-11-13-/1, RSC.

The Superior Council eventually authorized the auction sale of all enslaved adults and children from the *Roue de Fortune* in New Orleans. At the same time, however, its ruling extended the ban on slave imports from Saint-Domingue "in all its form and content" to Martinique and other Caribbean islands. [28] While those prohibitions threatened the main remaining sources of slave arrivals, their enforcement depended on government agents who had long encouraged a bustling intercolonial trade that was itself largely illegal. Louisiana's maritime commerce was open to all French subjects since 1731, but it remained regimented by the mercantilist system known as *exclusif colonial*. As the name implies, it reserved trade with France's colonies to French merchants carrying French cargoes aboard French-owned vessels, which also had to be licensed and fitted in one of 13 approved ports in the metropole. In practice, this meant that most commerce with other colonies was considered contraband, or *interlope*—even if this broad definition knew many exceptions, notably during wartime.[29]

Various forms of smuggling were instrumental to Louisiana's economy, which relied on inter-American commerce at least as much as on licit transatlantic trade with the metropole. Between 1735 and 1763, more than half intercolonial voyages to or from Louisiana went through a foreign and usually forbidden port. By the mid-eighteenth century, Louisiana's trade with Spanish colonies alone was worth 250 percent to 333 percent of its exports to France. [30] Yet colonial authorities prosecuted very few smuggling cases, and issued even fewer convictions, whether they directly profited from it or viewed

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[28] "Extrait des registres des audiences du Conseil Supérieur de la Louisiane," 1765-11-16/5, RSC.

[29] Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 103–4; Dubé, *Les biens publics*, 157-159.

[30] Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 119–20. On this intercolonial trade, see also Surrey, *The Commerce of Louisiana*, 445–63; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 69–72.

it as an economic necessity. [31] According to Shannon Dawdy, illegal trade was indeed considered legitimate in Louisiana, where merchants and administrators alike participated a form of "rogue colonialism" that flaunted imperial rules and created a distinct political economy. Because there were no customs house or police to stop contraband in the colony, institutionalized smugglers even recorded some of their ventures in civil suits and notarized documents. From 1728 to 1768, a syndicate of local merchants regularly intervened in public affairs, using their influence on the Superior Council and lobbying colonial administrators to secure government protection for smuggling operations.[32]

No contraband was more valuable to Louisiana's merchants, planters, and administrators than slaves. French governors were all among its largest slaveholders and, at least from the 1750s on, discreetly assisted colonists in procuring captives from the Antilles.[33] The colony's isolation from France during the Seven Years' War, the opening of its colonial trade negotiated by the British in the ensuing peace treaty, and restrictions on arrivals from the French Antilles encouraged imports from foreign colonies in the following decade. [34] How many captives reached Louisiana in this manner can only be speculated, but historians have shown that smuggling played an essential part in the transshipment of slaves across the Circum-Caribbean world, especially toward other secondary markets like Guadeloupe or Guyana.[35] Gregory O'Malley once calculated that

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[31] Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 112–28.

[32] Banks, *Chasing Empire*, 212; Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 127, 135–37.

[33] Baillardel and Prioult, *Le chevalier de Pradel*, 252–54; Dubé, "Les biens publics," 485–86.

[34] Ingersoll, "The Slave Trade," 141–42; Banks, *Chasing Empire*, 171, 179; Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 133–34.

[35] Lucien Abénon, "Le problème des esclaves de contrebande à la Guadeloupe pendant la première moitié du XVIIIe siècle," *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire de la Guadeloupe* 38 (1978): 49–58; David Geggus, "The French Slave Trade: An Overview," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2001): 126; Pritchard, *In Search of Empire*, 218–19; Banks, "Official Duplicity"; Gregory E. O'Malley and Alex Borucki, "Patterns in the

235 captives were exported or reexported from the West Indies to the Gulf Coast before 1770, but this estimate is certainly far too conservative. Approximately one hundred ships visited Louisiana each year between 1737 and 1764 alone, and anecdotal evidence suggests that many of them carried some slaves, clandestinely or under various legal pretexts, along with their cargo and passengers.[36]

Although the abandonment of the transatlantic slave trade in 1731 did not entirely stop arrivals of African laborers, it hampered the expansion of Louisiana's plantation economy, which would only turn into a "second Saint-Domingue" after the Haitian Revolution displaced the first one at the end of the eighteenth century. By the 1730s, however, the mass transportation of Africans by the *Compagnie* had already produced a majority Black population in the colony (figure 4). Excluding Natives, Louisiana counted a little over 7,000 permanent residents at the time, two thirds of whom were enslaved Black men, women, and children. After a sharp but brief drop, their number would continue to grow, albeit at a slower pace, until the end of the French regime. Enslaved Black Louisianans still represented just over half of a colonial population of roughly 11,500 in 1766.[37]

Intercolonial Slave Trade across the Americas before the Nineteenth Century," *Tempo* 23, no. 2 (2017): 314–38.

[36] Gregory E. O'Malley, "Beyond the Middle Passage: Slave Migration from the Caribbean to North America, 1619-1807," *William and Mary Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2009): 153. According to Shannon Dawdy's calculations, a yearly average of 28 documented ships reached Louisiana between 1737 and 1764, but "these recorded ship arrivals represent a 20-30 percent sample of *actual* (and largely unrecorded) shipping." Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 118.

[37] In Saint-Domingue, by comparison, enslaved people of African descent represented 86 percent of the colonial population in a 1732 census, and over 93 percent by 1775. See "État de Saint-Domingue," 1732, CARAN, MAR, G, 51, fol. 125; Thomas N. Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South, 1718-1819* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 123.

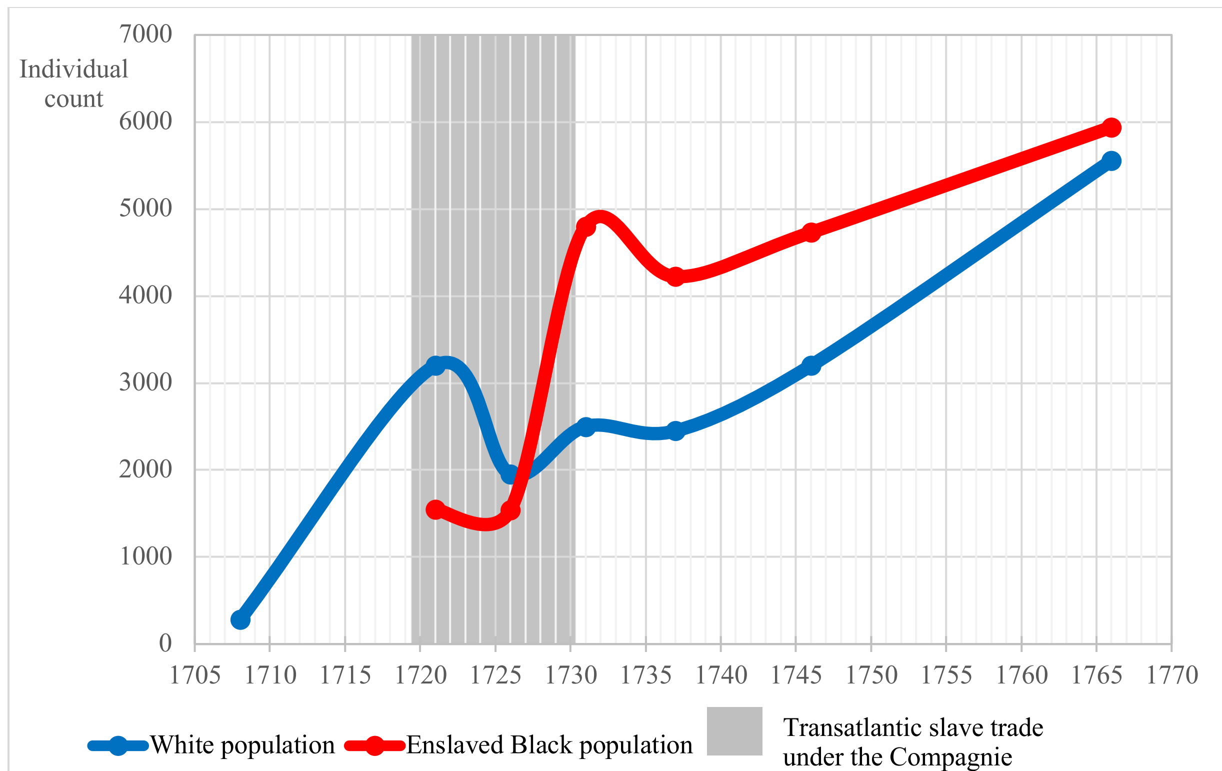

Figure 2. Demographic evolution of Louisiana's colonial population, 1708-1766.

In the ostensible absence of shipments from Africa, this demographic resilience has been interpreted as evidence that the local slave population grew nearly exclusively through natality.[38] Louisiana's administrators and colonial boosters repeatedly used this argument in their appeals to reopen the transatlantic slave trade, which they presented as a more urgent but also safer investment on the continent than in the Antilles thanks to a lesser mortality. An ambitious 1758 plan to revive tobacco cultivation in the Mississippi Valley similarly presented the natural growth of its enslaved population as a major asset,

[38] Surrey, *The Commerce of Louisiana*, 245; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 175–84; Ingersoll, "The Slave Trade," 134–35; Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 175–76.

when Caribbean colonies depended on continuous slave arrivals for their demographic and economic survival.[39]

Such assertions likely exaggerated the demographic vitality of Afro-Louisianans while overlooking the impact of their forced and often clandestine mobility between colonies, a problematic emphasis echoed in scholarly debates among historians of African American slavery. The late Gwendolyn Midlo Hall notably argued that Louisiana's Black population was self-sustaining as early as the 1730s due to more favorable conditions than in the West Indies, including a healthier environment, a milder labor regime, and more stable slave families. According to Hall, this natural increase contributed to an early process of creolization, as a growing generation of slaves born in Louisiana developed an Afro-American culture between two waves of African immigration. Yet more extensive demographic calculations suggest that the enslaved population experienced a negative natural growth for most of the period, and that it could not have expanded without forced immigration from the Caribbean. Fertility rates among enslaved women were simply too low to allow for natural increase, especially in the Lower Mississippi valley where most Afro-Louisianans were concentrated.[40] Like in the Antilles

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[39] "Mémoire contenant une idée generale des colonies et l'examen particulier des moyens et du temps nécessaire pour mettre la colonie de la Louisiane en état de fournir à la consommation du tabac," 1758, CAD, MD, Amérique, 2, fol. 226. See also "Observations sur les differentes cultures des terres du Mississippi," by Augias, 28 March 1747, ANOM, C13, A31, fol. 190; "Mémoire sur les projets d'établissement en Louisiane," 1750, ANOM, C13, A34, fol. 397. The latter memorandum estimated, with some exaggeration, that slave mortality in the Louisiana hardly reached one percent per year compared to ten percent in Saint-Domingue.

[40] Lachance, Paul Lachance, "The Growth of Free and Slave Populations in the French Colonial Louisiana," in *French Colonial Louisiana and the Atlantic World*, ed. Bradley G. Bond (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 229, 231. According to Lachance, the child/woman ratio among the Black population dropped from around 1.5 to 0.75 between 1737 and 1763, which made its growth impossible without immigration. For evidence of natural growth in smaller communities, see Lachance, 219; Carl J. Ekberg, *French Roots in the Illinois Country: The Mississippi Frontier in Colonial Times* (University of Illinois Press, 2000), 151; Sophie H. Burton and F. Todd Smith, "Slavery in the Colonial Louisiana Backcountry: Natchitoches, 1714-1803," *Louisiana History* 52, no. 2 (2011), 154-55.

then, the growth of this population depended on imports of captives. This is confirmed by unbalanced sex ratios among Black adults at the end of the French regime, with almost 130 men for 100 women, which could only result from the arrivals of mostly male migrants.[41] There remains much to learn about the Circum-Caribbean slave trade, but this demographic evidence combined with the documented presence of African-born bondspeople reexported from the West Indies, like those aboard the *Roue de Fortune*, suggests that its importance has long been underestimated.[42] Although largely clandestine and poorly documented, the arrivals of enslaved people from the Caribbean helped sustain the demographic growth of Louisiana's Afro-Creole population.

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The bloodless insurrection against Louisiana's first Spanish governor, Antonio de Ulloa, provided further evidence of an important regional slave trade. The defense of slave smuggling activities even figured prominently among the motives of the French and Creole elites who briefly expelled the incoming Spanish administration from New Orleans in 1768. When the Superior Council ousted Ulloa, they denounced the alleged tyranny of his administration in a decree followed by a *Mémoire des Habitants et Négociants de la Louisiane* ("Memorandum of the Inhabitants and merchants of Louisiana).[43] Mobilizing patriotic and liberal Enlightenment rhetoric, the rebels demanded to retain their freedoms

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[41] Lachance, "The Growth of the Free and Slave Populations," 229, 231.

[42] Lachance, "The Growth of the Free and Slave Populations," 207; Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 175–76.

[43] "Arrêt du Conseil supérieur," 29 October 1768, F3, 25, fols. 290-301; "Mémoire des habitants et négociants de la Louisiane sur l'événement du 29 octobre 1768," ANOM, F3: Collection Moreau de Saint-Méry, 25, fols. 302-317. Both documents, which were among the earliest printed in colonial Louisiana, are published in Charles Gayarré, *Histoire de La Louisiane*, vol. 2 (New Orleans: Magne & Weisse, 1847), 164–76 and 180–202.

and privileges under French rule. While their main grievances focused on Spanish mercantilist regulations, the insurgent council also accused Ulloa of treating enslaved Africans with too much complacency.[44] In a letter sent to the King of France, they shamelessly complained that "your subjects were threatened with slavery, and their negroes acquired degrees of freedom."[45]

The colonists' rejection of Iberian commercial rules met their defense of Louisiana's slaveholding regime as they blamed Ulloa for endangering the intercolonial slave trade supplying the area. "The prohibition he made last year to bring negroes in this colony," argued the 1768 *Mémoire*, "struck at the same time commerce and agriculture. It took away some considerable profits from merchants and restrained the means of settlers to grow stronger."[46] But what Ulloa really threatened were the thriving slave smuggling activities of local elites. In previous years, the Spanish governor and his French predecessor had actively promoted slave imports from Barbados, Jamaica, and Pensacola.[47] The so-called "prohibition" denounced by the New Orleans insurgents merely enforced preexisting legislation. In 1767, the Spanish governor arrested a French trader named Pierre Cadis and his associate, for concealing the fact that some of the captives they sold in Louisiana were not Africans but those "domiciled" in Martinique. Those contraband slaves were seized, inspected, and expelled from the colony. The 1768

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[44] For an analysis of the ideological language of those documents, see Cécile Vidal, "Francité et situation coloniale: Nation, empire et race en Louisiane française (1699-1769)," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 64, no. 5 (2009): 1041–49.

[45] "Très humbles representations qu'adressent au roi, notre honoré et Souverain Seigneur, les gens tenant son conseil supérieur à la Nouvelle-Orléans, province de la Louisiane," 22 November 1768, cited in Gayarré, *Histoire de La Louisiane*, 2:222.

[46] "Mémoire des habitants et négociants de la Louisiane," cited in Gayarré, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, 2:195.

[47] Contract between Evan Jones and Durand brothers, 1765-12-20/2, Declaration of Peter Hill, 1766-09-30/1, RSC; Ingersoll, "The Slave Trade," 141–42.

Mémoire demanded the merchants' pardon and protested Ulloa's heavy-handed policing, alleging that he had only acted to eliminate some competition for a slave trading venture of his own. Unmistakably though, the insurgents were the ones fighting to preserve their business interests. Of the six men sentenced to death as the rebellion's leaders a year later, three were commercial partners in Cadis' slave smuggling operation–including Nicolas Chauvin de Lafrénière, the Creole attorney general, and Pierre Caresse, the co-author of the *Mémoire*. Cadis himself was one of the main financial backers of the revolt.[48] Beyond its liberal and nationalist language, the revolt of 1768 confirmed the importance of slave contraband and Caribbean imports, which were both disproportionately beneficial to local elites.

[48] Gayarré, *Histoire de La Louisiane*, 2:174–75, 218–19; Marc Villiers du Terrage, *Les Dernières Années de La Louisiane Française* (Paris: Guilmoto, 1905), 267–68, 278–79, 309; Frances Kolb, "The New Orleans Revolt of 1768: Uniting against Real and Perceived Threats of Empire," *Louisiana History* 59, no. 1 (2018): 28–29, 37.