

CIUDADANÍA POR ASIMILACIÓN Y POR AUTONOMÍA, GUADALUPE, 1792-1802

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet essai l'auteur examine et tente de comprendre les manifestations divergentes de l'idée de citoyenneté pendant la période révolutionnaire à partir des revendications que présentent gens de couleurs et esclaves insurgés en 1792 et 1793. Par leur combat pour l'égalité raciale et la liberté, ils revendiquent une assimilation politique et juridique, transformant le sens des droits républicains en Guadeloupe. En contraste, la période de 1798-1802 est marquée par la résistance au régime métropolitain, hostile aux politiques émancipatrices: l'exemple du régime de Toussaint Louverture inspire l'idée que l'élimination des Blancs constitue un préalable à la préservation de la liberté –sans écarter, pour autant, de la part de certains groupes une possible alliance entre Noirs et Blancs. Au sein des transformations socio-économiques qui marquent ces deux périodes, émergent des approches successives et divergentes ("assimilation" ou "autonomie") —de la citoyenneté.

SAMENVATTING

Het artikel analyseert de veranderende articulaties van burgerschap in Guadeloupe in de periode van 1792 tot 1802. De auteur verwijst naar een initiatief rond 1790 van de gekleurde bevolking, in samenwerking met de opstandelingen, waarin zij opkwamen voor hun rechten en dat betekende voor deze groep hun juridische assimilatie in het systeem van de Franse Revolutionaire wet. Een tegenovergestelde initiatief dook op in 1797 en 1798, toen ex-slaven en gekleurden hun rechten verdedigden maar deze betekende voor deze groep autonomie tegenover een groeiende vijandige Franse regering. In deze context bouwde de lokale bevolking voort op het voorbeeld van Toussaint L'Ouverture in Saint Domingue en de blanken werden dan beschouwd als vijanden van gelijkheid, die vernietigd moesten worden om de eigen rechten te kunnen behouden. Tegelijkertijd waren er tendenzen binnen de strijd voor autonomie die voorstanders waren van interraciale allianties om de vernietiging van de Republikeinse emancipatie tegen te houden. Door na te gaan hoe burgerschap gedefinieerd werd in die twee periodes, verzoekt de auteur het ontstaan te begrijpen van verschillende benaderingen in een context van radicale sociale en economische veranderingen in Guadeloupe. Volgens de auteur bieden deze verhalen interessante perspectieven op de meer algemene historische ontwikkeling van visies op burgerschap in the Caraïbisch gebied.

CITIZENSHIP THROUGH ASSIMILATION
AND THROUGH AUTONOMY:
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ABSTRACT

This article examines the formation of citizenship in Guadeloupe between 1792 and 1802. It studies the demands for the attainment of rights presented by members of the black community and insurgent slaves in 1790, arguing their judicial rights according to the legal system produced under the French Revolution. Similarly, the article analyses the demands presented in 1797 and 1798 by former slaves and members of black population in their struggles for autonomy in the face of an ever more hostile French government. The article aims to show how these examples, very different but interrelated, emerged in succession at the time of radical and profound social and economic changes in Guadeloupe. This paper offers an interesting perspective on the theme of the development of citizenship in the Caribbean.

Key words: *Guadeloupe, French Revolution, citizenship, slave insurrection, rights.*

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la conformación de la ciudadanía en Guadalupe durante el periodo 1792-1802. Comprende el estudio de las demandas presentadas por la población negra y esclavos insurgentes en 1790 para la obtención de sus derechos, argumentando su asimilación jurídica al sistema de leyes emanadas de la Revolución Francesa, así como las demandas presentadas entre 1797 y 1798 por antiguos esclavos y población negra en su lucha por su autonomía frente a un gobierno francés cada vez más hostil. Se pretende mostrar cómo tales aproximaciones, divergentes pero entrelazadas, emergieron en sucesión en medio de profundas y radicales transformaciones económicas y sociales en Guadalupe. Este artículo nos ofrece una interesante perspectiva en el amplio desarrollo histórico de la visión de la ciudadanía del Caribe.

Palabras clave: *Guadalupe, Revolución francesa, ciudadanía, insurrección de esclavos, derechos.*

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The history of citizenship in Guadeloupe during the “Age of Revolution,” encompasses two different and in many ways contradictory directions. During the early 1790s, slave insurgents and *gens de couleur* articulated their demands for rights by arguing for their juridical assimilation into the system of French Revolutionary law. Through military and political action, and in conjuncture with the larger insurrectionary struggles in St. Domingue, these insurgents ultimately “universalized” emerging ideas and practices of citizenship, giving new content to the language of rights and helping to bring about the abolition of slavery in 1794. In the wake of emancipation, the administration of Victor Hugues created a regime in which equality before the law became interwoven with new forms of exclusion. The contradictions of this regime lay the foundation for the very different struggles for citizenship that took shape starting in 1798, in which demands for rights were presented by many former slaves and *gens de couleur* through demands for autonomy from an increasingly hostile French government. Ultimately, a violent struggle broke out in Guadeloupe during the course of 1802, leading to the defeat of the resistance under the leadership of Louis Delgrès and the re-establishment of slavery, though this defeat propelled the final stages of the war for Haitian independence.¹

The period stretching from 1789 to 1802 in Guadeloupe, then, provides us with a relatively contained chronological period through which to explore the emergence of contradictory and yet historically interlinked visions of Caribbean citizenship. This paper explores the ways in which citizenship was constituted during these two different periods of struggle and seeks to understand how and why such divergent approaches emerged in succession in the midst of radical and profound social and economic transformations in Guadeloupe. Understanding this period, I suggest, requires us to effectively conceptualize both the contradictions between these approaches and the reasons for which they seemed effective to the diverse groups within the population of African descent in the Caribbean at different moments. This piece is part of a larger attempt to re-think developments in throughout the French Caribbean during the “Age of

¹ This summary draws on Dubois (1998 and 1999, 363-392); for general studies of Guadeloupe during this period see Adélaïde-Mérlande (1986), Bangou (1989), Pérotin-Dumon (1984). See also Abénon and the other articles in the collection edited by Martin and Yacou (1989), as well as the important articles in the collection *Mourir pour les Antilles: Indépendance nègre ou esclavage, 1802-1804* (Martin and Yacou, 1991). On Hugues' regime see also Cormack (1997, 31-41).

Revolution” and to articulate their broader impact on ideas and practices of colonial governance and citizenship in the Atlantic world.

Historians of the “Age of Revolution” have a habit of making, and certainly overstating, bold claims about the ways in which this period created the foundations for centuries of subsequent political developments. It will be obvious that part of the inspiration for this paper is that the divergent visions —of citizenship through Republican assimilation versus citizenship through autonomy or independence— continue to animate political debates and struggles in the French Caribbean up to the present day. Although I do not wish to claim that there is a simple genealogy relating contemporary debates to those of the Revolution, I do wish to suggest that examining a period in which both strains of political thought emerged in relationship to one another can help us better understand the complex interrelation between them. As it does with many other issues, the “Age of Revolution” provides in this case a set of condensed historical events and transformations that speak to broader developments in the history of political theory and practice. Through a set of local stories, then, I hope to contribute to our understanding of the historical developments regarding visions of citizenship in the Caribbean.

A number of incidents involving first gens de couleur and then insurgent slaves in Guadeloupe can help us understand how demands for equal rights were articulated during the early 1790s. One of these occurred in October of 1792, after royalists had taken over both Martinique and Guadeloupe, sending Republicans, including many gens de couleur, into exile on the British Island of Dominica. These Republicans-in-exile decided that since they had stayed true to the French government by fleeing royalist control, they were the legitimate representatives of the islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, and were entitled to carry out the overdue election of parliamentary representatives. When they gathered to do so, a number of gens de couleur took advantage of the rights granted to them in April of 1792 to participate as electors. They were fairly well-represented (15% of the electors presented themselves as gens de couleur), and one of these chosen as a representative was an *homme de couleur* from Martinique, Jean Littée. Having traveled to France to take their seats in the National Assembly, the representatives from Martinique and Guadeloupe presented Littée’s presence among them as proof of the loyalty of the electors of Martinique and Guadeloupe to the Republic. “He is an homme de couleur, he is our colleague, and this is the first homage the whites have given to the virtues of this class that has until now

been so unjustly forgotten”, they declared. In accepting the three representatives, the National Convention reiterated the importance of the racial integration of the representatives: “Nothing better proves the respect of the electors for equality than the nomination of the Citoyen Littée.” They added that this action might help the Republic recover its lost territories:

We can even predict that his admission into the Convention will have great effects, not only among the gens de couleur who elected him but also among those who have been misled by the counter-revolutionaries, and who will quickly abandon them as soon as they hear of the great welcome their brothers have received from us. This is perhaps all that will be necessary to reestablish our two colonies to their legitimate dependence.

Through a set of arguments that prophesied those that would transform St. Domingue in 1793, racial integration was presented as the foundation for the preservation of colonies threatened by royalist white planters.²

In the meantime, gens de couleur had forcefully demonstrated their loyalty to the Republic by helping to end royalist control in Guadeloupe. In December of 1792, a French convoy sailed into the Eastern Caribbean carrying Republican troops and the Captain Lacrosse, who had been named Governor of both Martinique and Guadeloupe. A large crowd of “*nègres* and *mulâtres*” gathered in Pointe-à-Pitre, and joined up with a group of soldiers who were carrying a tri-color flag. They demanded that local officials fly it in the place of the white flag of the royalists flying over the city. Similar movements occurred elsewhere on the island, and when Lacrosse heard the news of the events he quickly arrived to take over governance of the colony, putting it once again under the control of the French Republic (Lacour, 1858, vol. 2, 126).

In the election in Dominica and then in the return of Republican rule in Guadeloupe, the gens de couleur defined themselves as a decisive pro-Republican force. They had articulated their loyalty even more clearly in March of 1793. A group describing themselves as the “New Citizens”

² “Procès verbal de l’élection de l’assemblée électorale des députés pour la Martinique et la Guadeloupe”, 28 October 1792, Archives Nationales, Paris (hereafter AN) C¹⁸¹, 86; “Pétition des députés des Iles Guadeloupe et Martinique à la Convention Nationale,” AN AD^{VII} 21C, #37; see also generally Benot (1989).

of Basse-Terre printed a declaration addressed to Lacrosse that asserted their attachment to the Republic and their intention of asserting their new political rights. It declared that “an odious faction, enemy of the French Revolution”, had plunged them into error until Lacrosse had arrived to enlighten them “as to the benefits that the mother country lavishes on us”, and “given us consciousness of our rights and obligations”. The proclamation concluded with a resolution “to spill, if necessary, to the last drop of our blood to force the respect of the laws of liberty and equality, which are the foundation of our political existence”. The proclamation was followed by a printed list of 147 signatures, which brought together a diverse group of men from Basse-Terre.³

Only four months later, slave insurgents in the town of Trois-Rivières also stated their intention to be part of the French Republic when they rose up and killed their masters, presenting the *fait-accompl*i to local white administrators as a necessary defense against royalist conspirators. “We have come to save you”, they boldly declared to the white troops sent to repress the revolt, “we want to fight for the Republic, the law, the nation, and order”. Instead of punishing them, local officials initiated an investigation that drew on slave testimony to support the accusations already made by the slave insurgents, and effectively condoned the punishment the insurgents had already meted out against these enemies of the Republic.⁴

This sketch of various political events that took shape in Guadeloupe shows clearly how arguments for rights (first on the part of *gens de couleur*, and then on the part of insurgent slaves) were articulated through demands for, and as an enactment of the inclusion in the Republic. These actions posed profound challenges for the colonial administrators of Guadeloupe, who were forced to confront the difficult question of how to oversee the political assimilation of *gens de couleur*, and later slaves, into the Republic. A series of events that took place in Guadeloupe in late 1793 illustrates the relationship between insurrection and particular forms of legal transformation on the island. The laws that emerged out of these events also suggest some of the ways in which assimilation co-existed with new forms of racial differentiation and exclusion.

³ The proclamation—the “*Adresse des nouveaux citoyens de la Basse-Terre, au citoyen Lacrosse, gouverneur provisoire de la Guadeloupe*”, 3 March 1793, ANSOM, C^{7A} 46, 190-192—is examined (and reprinted) in Pérotin-Dumon (1984).

⁴ See Dubois (1998) for a detailed account of the Trois-Rivières revolt.

In late 1793, the Governor of Guadeloupe, Victor Collot introduced a series of policies aimed at facilitating the process of bringing the recently enfranchised gens de couleur —“new citizens”— into full political participation. He did so in relation to the active and increasingly powerful group of “new citizens” who, having announced their political presence in March of 1793, were, through the political clubs of the colony, playing an increasingly important political role in the colony. Among these, there was a man named Segouny-Fortemaison, who in July of 1793 spoke to the Jacobin *Société des Amis de la République* of Basse-Terre, celebrating the fact that all free men in the colony were equal under the law, proclaiming that the nation was “our common mother,” and that “even the slightest nuance of demarcation between us has been forever abolished”.⁵

In September of 1793, Collot drew up a law detailing certain steps he believed were necessary for the political integration of the gens de couleur. He declared that since the application of the decree of April 1792 granting equal rights to gens de couleur, “the prejudice of color has been destroyed, and all free men have been united under the quality of *citizen*”. Unfortunately, Collot noted that this change was not always reflected in the language used by the local authorities, which out of necessity continued to distinguish the “new citizens” as a separate group. Since any speech which indicated “some nuance or distinction among citizens, goes against the spirit of the law”. However, Collot decreed—following decisions that it seems had, already been taken among the Jacobin clubs of Basse-Terre, in which gens de couleur were well represented—that terms such as *citoyen nouveau*, *citoyen de couleur*, “and others which mark the distinction between free men”, were to be eliminated in all public speeches and laws. Such terms would cede to the undivided denomination of “citizen”. This decision was without its precedents. While, in the wake of the 1791 insurrection in St. Domingue, whites and gens de couleur independently sought to end the conflicts between them with a “Concordat”, one of its main provisions was the erasure of racial distinctions such as *le nommé*, *Nègre libre*, *mulâtre libre*, *quarteron libre*, *citoyens de couleur*, so that all citizens would be referred to with the terms previously used only for whites.⁶

⁵ “Discours prononcé par le Citoyen Segouny-Fortemaison à la Société des Amis de la République”, 22 July 1793, AN D^{XXV} 123, 975, 153. On the Jacobin clubs of Guadeloupe during this period, see Pérotin-Dumon (1984).

⁶ “Extrait des registres... Commission Générale et Extraordinaire”, 5 September 1793, AN D^{XXV} 123, 973; see also “Extrait des Registres... Société des Amis de la République Française,” 21 Pluviôse An 2 (9 February 1794), AN AD^{VII} 21C, #46, discussed below; on St.

Eliminating such distinctions was only one piece of Collot's project, though. His law noted that while the "law of the 4th of April", had "called on all free men to exercise the same rights", it found "those who have been deprived of their rights until now" in no state to do so. "Debased by unjust prejudice", and "deprived of all political rights, and even civil rights", the gens de couleur had experienced "only the shadow of liberty, and not its effects". The result was "an unformed chaos, where the traits of civil existence barely exist": the gens de couleur were plagued by "the indifference of each individual, the dismemberment of families, the carefree behavior of both sexes, and the paucity of their fortunes". For Collot, this "unformed chaos" could only be reformed by granting the gens de couleur a future. As public careers were opened up to them, they would bury the marks of their past through the "emulation" of the "virtues and behavior" of whites. As the state established primary schools where children of all colors could learn the "lessons of the spirit, the heart and the soul that will one day form true and good citizens," equality would acquire "its ultimate perfection". But the first and most crucial step in this process of granting "this class of individuals" the "characteristics that will place them in society and establish the individuals relationships that bring together and unite individuals" was the creation of "legitimate" families. And in order to create such families, gens de couleur had to take on family names.⁷

Several months before in St. Anne, another town in Guadeloupe, a group of gens de couleur leaders had started a large-revolt that eventually mobilized many hundreds of local slaves before being put down. They did so in response to a rumor that a law had arrived in the colony granting equal inheritance rights to legitimate and illegitimate children but that the Governor Collot was refusing to apply. In a context in which gens de couleur were often the illegitimate sons and daughters of white planters, such a law had obvious importance for many in the community. The revolt, which was repressed in part because of a split between gens de couleur leaders and slave insurgents, nevertheless represented a profound economic demand on the part of the gens de couleur.⁸

Domingue see the *Concordat, ou Traité de paix entre les Citoyens Blancs et les Citoyens de Couleur des quatorze paroisses de la Province de l'Ouest de la partie Française de Saint-Domingue*, 19 October 1791 (Bibliothèque Nationale).

⁷ "Extrait des registres... Commission Générale et Extraordinaire" AN D^{xxv} 123, 973.

⁸ On the revolt at St. Anne, see the documents in Pérotin-Dumon (1984, 278-282).

Collot was obviously responding to this revolt with his decree, which sought to contain the economic ramifications of the political integration of the gens de couleur. He explicitly eliminated the potential for legal claims by gens de couleur to the property of their white parents by declaring that they could not use their former master's names, or names granted by masters at the time of emancipation, as "proper and characteristic" names for themselves. Instead, they were ordered to gather together and establish new names for themselves. In large families the eldest of the family—whether male or female—was to determine the name of the family in order to establish the "division of the branches that spring from the same free trunk." The children of a free mother were also to gather together and choose a common name that would assure their inheritance rights. Collot was particularly preoccupied with the identification of a "legitimate trunk" within matrifocal families, a fact made clear by the grammatical slippage from masculine to feminine in one article of his law: "In order to give to free individuals and families a civil existence like that of all citizens, all free people, of all sexes, freed recently or long ago, will take, if they have not already, a proper name that will characterize her and the children that she bears, if she marries." By gaining a legitimate name that could assert the "links of blood", gens de couleur would, in Collot's moral universe, receive the legal existence necessary for the orderly transfer of property within families. Even as rights were granted, and distinctions were in principle eliminated in official language, administrators presented the existing families of the gens de couleur, (notably those clustered around women) as sources of illegitimacy and degradation. This element of the law makes startlingly clear the complex linkage between ideologies of race and gender that would be a repeated aspect of post-emancipation regimes. In a curious way, the assimilation of gens de couleur was both accepted and ultimately deferred through policies that aimed to channel the forms of their assimilation in certain ways.⁹

The ambiguities of Collot's law were only a prelude to the much more complex, and similarly contradictory, policies put into place in Guadeloupe under the regime of Victor Hugues from 1794 to 1798.¹⁰ Yet, despite

⁹ "Extrait des registres... Commission Générale et Extraordinaire" AN D^{xxv} 123, 973. For a discussion of similar questions raised in Martinique after the 1848 emancipation, see Cottias (1997, 293-314). For more on similar links in other contexts see Holt (1995, 61-82).

¹⁰ See Dubois (1999), Bangou (1989), Abénon (1989) and Cormack (1997).

the many restrictions imposed on the ex-slaves in this regime (who if they were not serving in the military were constrained to work for wages that were often never paid on the plantations where they had been slaves), they did mobilize one of the crucial aspects of citizenship: the right to documentation. They used this new right to legitimize old relationships through marriage and assure their hold over property and its transfer to their children. Ex-slaves on plantations also used these documents to assimilate new arrivals from Africa —human “cargo” from English ships captured by French corsairs— placed on their plantations. In groups of three or four, they brought these Africans to the municipal offices of Basse-Terre and gave them new, French, names. They did so in registers of births, marking their social existence, their “rebirth” into the Republic. And in so doing they described the new arrivals as “from the coast of Africa”, marking their origin instead of their “race”. In certain cases they called them “African citizens”.¹¹

One of the most compelling examples of the expression of citizenship on the part of ex-slaves, and of their involvement with the laws of the Republic comes from an 1801 notary document from Guadeloupe. In September of that year, two former slaves appeared in front of a notary in Basse-Terre to explain how they had gained their freedom. In February of 1794, when the National Convention abolished slavery throughout the French Republic, both Geneviève Labothière dite Mayoute and her brother Joseph Labothière were slaves. But while Geneviève was in Guadeloupe, where the decree was instituted in June of 1794, Joseph was in Martinique, which was occupied by the British, and therefore he “did not enjoy the benefit of general liberty pronounced by the laws of the French Republic”. As many slaves had throughout the preceding centuries, Joseph, who was a tailor, managed to earn money through his “active work” and “honest industry” until he finally had enough to buy his freedom. His master, however, refused to sell him his freedom. Desperate, Joseph wrote to his free sister in Guadeloupe, who by then was working as a merchant, and asked her to help him. She could not, of course, travel to Martinique herself without endangering her freedom, and so she arranged for a white man named Jacques Dupuy to go to Martinique and buy Joseph. In October of 1796, Dupuy found Joseph and purchased him as his own slave. Both men then traveled to St. Thomas, where two years later Geneviève was able to meet with them.

¹¹ See ANSOM, EC Basseterre 10 (Births, 1797), Numbers 64, 65, 71-73.

She reimbursed Dupuy for the money he had paid for her brother, and therefore became his legal owner. Soon afterwards, Joseph paid back his sister and they returned to Guadeloupe, both of them free.¹²

In registering this series of events, the siblings had to confront a complicated legal problem. Because Joseph was in Martinique, where slavery had not been abolished, it was necessary, and legal, for him to buy his freedom. But Geneviève, as a resident of Guadeloupe and therefore a subject of the laws of the Republic, had broken the law by participating in the purchase of slave. To justify this transgression, Geneviève invoked both the legal and natural rights she and her brother had as human beings and as citizens of the French Republic. She declared that while her brother had the right to be “taken out of slavery by the laws of the Republic”, he had been “forced by circumstances, because he was in a colony which had been usurped by the enemies of France, to re-conquer his liberty with his own money”. Therefore, in helping him free himself, she had “purely and simply committed a benevolent and fraternal act, based on the laws of nature, without hurting the laws of the Republic”. Geneviève and Joseph’s declaration, while sensitive to the fact that Geneviève had broken the law by purchasing a human being, claimed broadly that the Republican decree of emancipation, and the natural rights on which it was based, gave the right to all those (even those in occupied territory) to fight for their freedom in whatever way they found necessary.

By the time this document was written, of course, the very regime of emancipation was becoming increasingly threatened, as the Labothière siblings seem to have known. In this year, the conflict between various groups in the Caribbean and metropolitan authorities deepened, and the process that was to lead to the re-establishment of slavery in Guadeloupe and the eventual independence of Haiti gained inertia. In these conflicts, the discourses of assimilation that had previously been a vehicle for struggles for equality were increasingly discarded by many in the French Caribbean. Instead, in the face of an increasingly hostile series of French administrators, soldiers and ex-slaves in the Caribbean began to imagine various kinds of autonomy as the guarantor of their rights. In Guadeloupe, the example of Toussaint Louverture’s regime in St. Domingue was a consistent source of inspiration in this regard.

In early 1797, Hugues had reported that a few *hommes de couleur* in Guadeloupe had publicly attacked his regime and lauded the increasing

¹² ADG Dupuch 2E2/27, 6 Vendémiaire An 10 (28 September 1801).

power of blacks and *citoyens de couleur* under the regime of Toussaint Louverture. “‘Only in St. Domingue’, they say, ‘do liberty and equality reign, men do what they wish, the agents are *de couleur*, or publicly live with *femmes de couleur*, and all the generals and the chiefs are *de couleur*, they dominate and the whites can do nothing about it.’” The receipt of letters from St. Domingue, Hugues claimed, had incited these claims, and a few had demanded positions in the government. One told Hugues that until there were *hommes de couleur* among the generals and the highest ranks of the administration, power would not be truly shared.¹³

In December of 1797, those involved in a revolt that erupted in Lamentin, against the regime of Victor Hugues again made reference to St. Domingue. The insurgents, most of whom were ex-slaves working as *cultivateurs* on plantations of the area, rallied around a cry for more political and economic power. According to Hugues’ report on the incident, the leaders of the revolt recruited these *cultivateurs* by asking:

Aren’t you tired of being poor? If you are free why are you working on the land of the whites? Why doesn’t all the fruit of your labor belong to you? You are three hundred against one. In St. Domingue everyone does what they please; all those in command are blacks; the whites have been chased away and the few that are left serve the blacks like you serve the whites.... Where does the money of the colony come from? From the sugar and the coffee that the blacks produce, since the whites have never worked the land. In one hour everything will be finished. The army is ours, we have to kill all the whites and the blacks and the *hommes de couleur* who occupy positions and who have received advantages from them, then you will have all the money of the colony, all the sugar, the coffee, the cotton and the merchandise to dress yourselves in.¹⁴

The revolt was defeated fairly quickly, to a large extent because of the willingness of Hugues’ black troops to fight against the insurgents. Hugues had armed ex-slaves from the moment he disembarked on the island in June of 1794, and they were the bulwark of his military regime. He continued the policy of integrating ex-slaves into the army, and Guadeloupe became the center for French Republican campaigns against

¹³ Hugues and Lebas to the Minister, 17 Ventôse An 5 (6 Mar. 1797), AN AF III 209, Dossier 954, #8.

¹⁴ Hugues and Lebas to Minister, 24 Nivôse An 6 (13 Jan. 1798), ANSOM C7A 50, 4-11.

the British colonies of the Eastern Caribbean. The army —and the Republican corsairs who roved the waters attacking enemy and neutral ships— provided unprecedented opportunities for social and economic advancement for many ex-slaves from Guadeloupe. The Lamentin insurrection tested the loyalty of many such slaves turned soldiers, but they had shown themselves loyal and disciplined in repressing it. Hugues noted of the soldiers who fought in Lamentin that “nine-tenths of this company, the elite of the army of the Antilles, are blacks and former slaves, unequaled in their boldness and in their wise and exemplary behavior”. Although some were approached to join the insurrection, they refused and instead reported the planned revolt to their superiors; “the indignation of these brave soldiers was extreme, and they were the first to convince their co-citizens that they were being trapped and misled.” The artillery officer Pierre Gédéon, for instance, arrested five leaders of the conspiracy who tried to recruit him. In fact, Hugues suggested, the whites left alone would likely have fled rather than confront the insurgents. “They scorn the blacks”, he wrote, “and nevertheless in all the insurrections of the Africans they are the first to run and hide. He who holds the key to the human heart seems to tell us that, in this country as in all others, tyrants, though used to commanding their slaves, always tremble in front of them.”¹⁵

This revolt presented a powerful indictment of Hugues’ regime, and made a claim for a different kind of system in the Caribbean, one that would place not only political power but economic power in the hands of gens de couleur and ex-slaves. During the next years, this kind of vision would repeatedly surface in Guadeloupe. Arguments for autonomy were articulated in reaction to changing policies in France. Even though laws were passed in 1798, actually strengthening the legal and political assimilation of the colonies into the French nation, striving towards what the major proponent of these policies, Etienne Laveaux, called “A System of Absolute Unity”, by 1799 the direction of metropolitan colonial policy ultimately went the other way. With Bonaparte’s rise to power, the principle of unity between metropole and colony was reversed and new laws declared that, once again, the colonies would be subjected to different laws from those of the metropole, dictated from Paris. Planters

¹⁵ Hugues and Lebas to Minister, 24 Nivôse An 6 (13 Jan. 1798), ANSOM C7A 50, 4-11. On the military service of ex-slaves see Anduse (1991 and 1989), as well as Bangou (1989), Adélaïde-Mérlande (1986) and Dubois (1999).

who had taken refuge from the Caribbean, as well as some who had formerly advocated emancipation, encouraged a return to pro-slavery policies. In 1801, the promise of a peace between France and Britain (finally declared in 1802 with the Treaty of Amiens) eliminated the military advantages associated with slave emancipation in the Antilles, and soon afterwards Bonaparte sent expeditions to the Caribbean to return to the colonies to their “pre-1789” situation.¹⁶

News of the changing opinions about colonial policy in the metropole circulated and caused concern in the Caribbean. In January of 1798 Hugues described how certain individuals in Guadeloupe were circulating the news of pro-slavery speeches given in France, and that such news spread “worry among the blacks that the Government had resolved that they would lose their liberty”. Some pro-slavery pamphlets appeared in Guadeloupe, attacking emancipation and claiming that as a result of it “we would leave our heads on the scaffold”. The effect of such news from France was compounded by the attitudes of the white planters themselves, who, according to Hugues, “still see the ownership of their former slaves as prey that has escaped them; they will seize with eagerness and greed any opportunity they have to get them between their hands”. The loosening Republican legislation on émigrés meant that already in 1797-98 certain planters were returning from exile to Guadeloupe, making claims on their property and on the labor of their ex-slaves turned *cultivateurs*. The return of the departed, wrote Hugues, made it difficult, “to contain the passions, the justifiable hatred, and the severity of the miserable black Africans against their former tyrants” which had exploded in the Lamentin insurrection. Indeed, if the ex-slaves, who were generally obedient, had committed “atrocious crimes” during the revolt, Hugues claimed it was to a large extent because of the inflammatory talk of their former masters, “particularly that of the wives of émigrés, of which there are many in this colony”.¹⁷

After 1798, as more émigrés returned and metropolitan regimes increasingly came under the sway of the arguments in favor reversing emancipation in the Caribbean, the social groups which had fought one another in Lamentin in 1797 began to find that they had a common in-

¹⁶ For Laveaux’s formulation, see the “Discours prononcé par Laveaux, sur l’anniversaire du 16 Pluviôse An 2,” Corps Législatif, Conseil des Anciens (Bibliothèque Nationale); on colonial policy during the Directory regime in France (1795-1799), see Gainot (1995).

¹⁷ Hugues and Lebas to the Minister, 24 Nivôse An 6 (13 Jan. 1798), ANSOM C7A 50, 4-11.

terest. The officer Pierre Gédéon, after helping to defuse the Lamentin insurrection in 1797, found himself urging insurrection against the metropolitan authorities in 1801. Gédéon was one among many —most notably the *homme de couleur* officer Louis Delgrès— who would respond to the actions of metropolitan administrators by defending what they saw as the true Republican policies of racial equality. For it increasingly became clear to many in Guadeloupe that fighting for Republican principles might mean fighting *against* French metropolitan authorities.

Emancipation had been administered by Republican regimes in the previous years as part of a larger, national struggle against the British. Service to the nation, both as laborers and as soldiers, became the symbol of responsible citizenship, and despite their restrictions these roles provided a context for economic and social mobility outside the lines set forth by the administrations. The Republic had been the guarantor of emancipation, even as the defense of the Republic was used to justify freedom's limits. What, then, were the Republicans of the Antilles to do as metropolitan authorities retreated from the Republican principles that had been applied in the Antilles? To whom did the people of Guadeloupe owe allegiance? If they were loyal to the Republic that had overseen the transformations on the island in the previous years, where should their loyalty lie when metropolitan authorities began to dismantle that Republic? As the people of the Antilles heard through news that arrived inconstantly from across the Atlantic and from elsewhere in the Caribbean about the new directions of colonial policy, they had to decide how to react to national authorities sent to the island. They made difficult choices between national loyalty and Republican principles, and drew on their experience of freedom and of its complex material and social possibilities in deciding how to act towards a Republic that was retreating from its previous policies of emancipation and racial equality.

The story of Pélage and Delgrès, and of the conflict that pitted ex-slaves and *gens de couleur* against French troops in Guadeloupe is by now well-known, at least for those familiar with the literature in French, and I do not have the time to explore it in detail here.¹⁸ What I hope I have suggested, however, is that this 1802 conflict was in a sense the end point of a longer process in which demands for citizenship that had been articulated in terms of assimilation into the Republic were trans-

¹⁸ For accounts of this period see Adélaïde-Mérlande (1986), Anduse (1989), Bangou (1989) and Saint-Ruf (1977).

muted into a desire to defend racial equality against a threatening French regime. What united the visions of citizenship during these two periods was their content, which was a complex but in many ways coherent struggle for racial equality.

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