

# **Women, Slavery, and British Imperial Interventions in Mauritius, 1810–1845**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the history of enslaved women and girls in British Mauritius from 1810 to 1845. Through an exploration of British colonial interventions in slaveholding, this study focuses on the narratives of enslaved women and girls to reveal intersections between colonialism, motherhood, violence, and resistance to bondage. The British colonial government introduced a series of measures to reform slavery conditions in Mauritius prior to the Emancipation Act (1833), as they did in several Atlantic colonies. This included the establishment of a Commission of Eastern Enquiry to investigate slaveholding and manumission practices, and make recommendations related to the amelioration of slavery in Mauritius. The Commission found that freedom was markedly difficult to achieve for bonded women in the island. Slave complaints registered with the Protector of Slaves office in 1829–30 indicate that unfree women and girls in Mauritius experienced unique forms of violence, and that they sometimes used the Protector of Slave’s services for different ends than their male counterparts. In comparison with men and boys, enslaved and newly emancipated women and girls also took part in disparate forms of religious and elementary instruction with the London Missionary Society and Lady Mico’s Charity. In sum, this dissertation significantly enriches the current scholarship about slavery in the Indian Ocean world through exploring, for the first time, the distinct experiences of bonded women in Mauritius.

## Résumé

Cette thèse vise à examiner l'histoire des femmes et filles esclaves à Maurice sous l'empire britannique entre 1810 et 1845. Au moyen d'une considération détaillée des diverses interventions dans le système d'esclavage par le gouvernement colonial britannique à cette époque, cette étude se penche sur les récits des femmes et jeunes filles esclaves afin d'exposer l'interrelation entre le colonialisme, la maternité, la violence, et la résistance à la servitude. Le gouvernement colonial britannique introduisit une série de mesures visant à reformer les conditions de vie des esclaves à Maurice avant de promulguer l'acte d'émancipation en 1833, tout comme les gouvernements britanniques faisaient dans d'autres colonies atlantiques. Ce programme de réforme comprenait l'établissement d'une *Commission of Eastern Enquiry* pour enquêter les pratiques d'esclavage et de manumission, de même que faire des recommandations en vue d'améliorer la condition de l'esclave à Maurice. La commission conclue que la liberté fut manifestement difficile à atteindre pour les femmes asservies de l'île. Les plaintes portées par les esclaves au bureau du *Protector of Slaves* en 1829–30 indiquent que les femmes et filles asservies de Maurice subissaient des formes particulières de violence, ainsi que ces femmes et filles parfois avaient recours aux services du *Protector of Slaves* à des fins différentes de celles de leurs homologues masculins. Par rapports aux hommes et garçons, les femmes et filles asservies aussi bien que celles dernièrement libérées participaient à diverses formes d'instruction religieuse et élémentaire fournie par la *London Missionary Society* et *Lady Mico's Charity*. En somme, cette thèse amène un approfondissement significatif au savoir actuel de l'esclavage dans l'Océan Indien en considérant, pour la première fois, les expériences des femmes asservies à Maurice.

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*Figure 1: Map of Mauritius*

## Introduction

In the early morning of 26 September 1832, Aglaé, a thirty-five-year-old enslaved woman living in Rivière du Rempart, Mauritius, quietly slipped away without the permission of Mme. Ligareau, her French-Mauritian owner. Without warning, Ligareau had assaulted Aglaé the previous evening with “several [fist] blows to the face,” followed by strikes to Aglaé’s body with a hairbrush. “Being entirely unconscious” of the faults she had committed to warrant the beating, Aglaé sought out the Assistant Protector of Slaves in her district to register a complaint and seek help from the British colonial authorities. The Assistant Protector could find “no marks upon her person” from the beating, but Aglaé insisted that Cécile, another enslaved woman in the household, had witnessed the event and could corroborate her story. Ligareau was invited to appear with Cécile at the Assistant Protector’s office for questioning. Five days passed in silence, and on 1 October 1832, Ligareau replied to the Assistant Protector denying all allegations. Further, she refused to meet the Assistant Protector, or agree to let Cécile either attend the meeting or give a witness statement.<sup>1</sup> The Assistant Protector referred the case to the Mauritian Attorney General for further investigation, and sent Aglaé home, where more bodily violence likely awaited her.

This dissertation seeks to position enslaved women at the heart of British imperial and Indian Ocean slavery studies, and to unabashedly amplify the stories and voices of bondswomen in early nineteenth-century British Mauritius. The Protector of Slaves and his assistants were among dozens of British colonial authorities in Mauritius between 1810 and 1845 who intervened in the island’s long-established slave-trading and slaveholding practices. Likewise, Aglaé was one of thousands of bonded individuals residing in the island, a legacy of

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<sup>1</sup> Complaint by Aglaé, 26 September 1832, Rivière du Rempart, Mauritius, July-December 1832, CO 172/31, National Archives (Kew) (hereafter NA).

slaveholding dating back to the sixteenth century when Dutch seafarers and traders first landed on the uninhabited shores of Mauritius with enslaved Africans in tow. Aglaé's complaint, one of many explored in this project, exemplifies my central aim: to identify enslaved women in the colonial archives for Mauritius, and tell their stories. In doing so, I reflect on British and French imperialism, chattel slavery in the Indian Ocean world, and gendered experiences of bondage. My dissertation therefore contributes to the growing body of scholarship addressing Mauritian slave history and women in bondage in Indian Ocean Africa, subjects that are significantly understudied.

This project also acts as a “roadmap” for future scholars seeking to study women in bondage in Mauritius (1810–45) in more depth, or to link slaveholding and British imperial projects in Mauritius to the Atlantic colonies and beyond. Unfree women are difficult to locate in the colonial archives, as their voices were rarely recorded for posterity, and few were literate.<sup>2</sup> Studies of women in bondage—and their productive and reproductive labour—in the early nineteenth-century Atlantic World have increased exponentially over the past twenty years.<sup>3</sup> Few

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<sup>2</sup> Vijaya Teelock has published *A Select Guide to Sources on Slavery in Mauritius; and, Slaves Speak Out: The Testimony of Slaves in the Era of Sugar* (Bell Village, Mauritius: African Cultural Centre, 1995), which was extremely useful for my archival research, as it includes some information about where enslaved women appear in the colonial archives for Mauritius. Marisa Fuentes has written the best new work about the challenges in using archives to research women in slavery, in *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). In 2016, the journal *History of the Present* (6, no. 2) also published an issue that exclusively examines the politics of the archive in slavery studies.

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society* (Kingston, Jamaica: Heinemann Publishers (Caribbean), 1990); Camillia Cowling, *Conceiving Freedom: Women of Color, Gender, and the Abolition of Slavery in Havana and Rio de Janeiro* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Catherine Lewis & J. Richard Lewis, *Women and Slavery in America: A Documentary History* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2011); David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) & *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Hilary Beckles, *Centering Women: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Princeton, NJ: M. Wiener, 1999); Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Maureen Elgersman Lee, *Unyielding Spirits: Black Women and Slavery in Early Canada and Jamaica* (New York: Garland Pub., 1999); Mary E. Frederickson and Delores M. Walters, *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Sarah L. Franklin, *Women and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Colonial Cuba* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2012); and Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

historians of Mauritius have followed suit.<sup>4</sup> This dissertation fills this gap by showcasing women and girls in bondage in Mauritius under British colonial rule. Each chapter focuses on a specific element of British imperialism and “intervention” in slaveholding, and from the related archival records, teases out the experiences of women. Chapters one and three, for example, examine trends in slave maternity, violence, and slavery amelioration measures in Mauritius. For greater context, the chapters also each provide some comparison to the Atlantic world during the same period.

Located in the western Indian Ocean, Mauritius belongs to a cluster of islands known as the Mascarenes, consisting of Réunion, a French territory formerly known as Île Bourbon; Rodrigues, today an autonomous outer island of the Republic of Mauritius; and Mauritius (see Figure 2 below). These islands, in addition to Madagascar, the Seychelles, the Comoros Islands, Zanzibar, and other small island groups along the East African coast, comprise Indian Ocean Africa.<sup>5</sup> Sitting about 1,100km (700 miles) east of Madagascar, Mauritius was historically a prized stopping point for Dutch, French, and British ships rounding the Cape on their way to trading ports in East Africa and South Asia, and thus was often referred to as the “star and key” of the Indian Ocean. The island has a long history of slaveholding and slave-trading within the western Indian Ocean.

What’s more, Mauritius was unique in being the only British island colony in this region dependent on bonded labour. In this sense, as discussed more extensively in the next section, Mauritius has a similar colonial and slaveholding history to many British Caribbean islands,

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<sup>4</sup> Megan Vaughan, Richard Allen, and Vijaya Teelock are three of the small number of scholars to pointedly examine the experiences of women in slavery in Mauritius. Their various works are all outlined below. Marina Carter has studied indentured women in the island, but overall, the historiography on this topic is quite sparse.

<sup>5</sup> This term is further explained by Gwyn Campbell in his work, *Africa and the Indian Ocean World from early times to 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).



*Figure 2: Map of the Western Indian Ocean world*

including Trinidad and Jamaica, which were characterized by chattel slavery, a dominant European slaveholding elite, and widespread sugar and agricultural production. Corporal punishment practices against the enslaved in Mauritius, for example, were similar to those practiced in the Caribbean. Though British Mauritius does figure in some volumes about British empire, emancipation, and slaveholding,<sup>6</sup> it is frequently omitted or only mentioned in passing.

<sup>6</sup> For examples of British empire volumes that include chapters or sections on Mauritius, see Alessandro Stanziani, *Labor on the Fringes of Empire: Voice, Exit, and the Law* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Catherine Hall,

This is often because British empire and slavery studies are regional—that is, focused on one geographic region, like the Caribbean, colonial North America, South Asia, Australia, the Atlantic world, or (less commonly) the Indian Ocean world. Thus, while Mauritius is studied alongside southern Africa, Indian Ocean Africa, and South Asia (in the case of indentured labour and diaspora studies), due to its isolated location far from other British island colonies, it is frequently left out of comparative imperial analyses of slavery and emancipation. With a focus on British colonialism in Mauritius, my project seeks to remedy this.

Additionally, digital history projects and online databases tracing nineteenth-century slavery in the British empire tend to focus only on the Atlantic colonies, thus omitting Mauritius. For example, as the name suggests, the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* contains little mention of non-Atlantic colonies.<sup>7</sup> Yet, slave-trading records from British Mauritius would be a rich addition to this database, and would highlight less common European slave trade routes, for example, around the Cape, and possibly the transport of enslaved peoples to and from the Mascarenes. Likewise, a database created by Montréal's French Atlantic History group, *Le marronage dans le monde Atlantique: sources et trajectoires de vie*, traces marronage and slave resistance in the French colonies; maroon records from Île de France (Mauritius) would be exceptional additions to their catalogue.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership* database is an online resource that does contain the names of dozens of Mauritian

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Nicholas Draper, and Keith McClelland, eds., *Emancipation and the Remaking of the British Imperial World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); David Lambert and Alan Lester, eds., *Colonial Lives across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery and the British Empire: from Africa to America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996); and Richard Gott, *Britain's Empire: Resistance, Repression, and Revolt* (New York: Verso Books, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> The *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* (<https://www.slavevoyages.org/>) is a rich resource for historians, with contributors and researchers from several institutions. The site is hosted by Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Another great digital resource that traces runaway slaves in eighteenth-century Britain is the *Runaway Slaves Britain* (<https://www.runaways.gla.ac.uk/>) database, launched in 2018 through the University of Glasgow (UK).

<sup>8</sup> *Le marronage dans le monde Atlantique: sources et trajectoires de vie*, hosted by the Université de Sherbrooke (Québec), date accessed 16 April 2019, [http://remparts.info/marronnage\\_2-0/fr/index.html](http://remparts.info/marronnage_2-0/fr/index.html).

slaveholders who received compensation for their enslaved property following the Emancipation Act (1833).<sup>9</sup> To break new historiographical ground, it is necessary to move towards global histories of slavery that encompass colonies across European and non-Western empires. Gendering these conversations is equally crucial. My dissertation is intended as a first step towards achieving this.

### *History & Historiography*

Though the uninhabited island was visited by Portuguese explorers—and likely Arab or Swahili seafarers—prior to the sixteenth century, the first well-documented visitors to Mauritius were the Dutch in 1598, though they only established a short-lived formal settlement in 1638.<sup>10</sup> The Dutch were the first to give “Mauritius” its name, and they were also the first to bring enslaved Malagasy (originating in Madagascar) to Mauritius. Over the course of the seventeenth century, a growing community of runaway slaves (maroons) began to inhabit the island’s forested areas. France claimed Mauritius with the *Compagnie des Indes* (French East Indies Company) in 1715, and the island was renamed Île de France (see Figure 3). A small group of French colonists arrived in 1721.<sup>11</sup> By mid-century, lucrative sugar and coffee plantations were emerging in Île de

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<sup>9</sup> *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership Database*, University College London, United Kingdom, date accessed 4 April 2019, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>. For more databases related to global slavery, the majority of which are Atlantic-focused, visit H-Net Slavery’s digital resource page, date accessed 8 April 2019, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/11465/pages/143424/digital-resources-study-global-slavery-and-slave-trade>.

<sup>10</sup> Soon after, the Dutch colonized the Cape in 1652. Megan Vaughan provides a thorough and fascinating account of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Mauritius in her book, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> For more on the early modern history of the island, see historian and former chief archivist of Mauritius, Auguste Toussaint’s *Histoire de L’île Maurice* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1974). Guy Rouillard has written extensively about the early histories of the island’s districts, the botanical gardens in Pamplemousses, plants, and sugar cane production. See for example, Guy Rouillard, *Histoire de la canne à sucre à l’Île Maurice, 1638-1989*

France, which became a French crown colony in 1767, as well as in nearby French-owned Île Bourbon.<sup>12</sup> Slave-trading was also pervasive. According to an estimate by Jean-Marie Filliot, over 160,000 bondspeople arrived in Île de France and Île Bourbon between 1670 and 1810, with forty-five per cent from Madagascar, and over forty per cent from Mozambique and elsewhere in East Africa. The remaining fifteen per cent arrived from West Africa and India.<sup>13</sup> As such, histories of slavery and trade in Mauritius are inherently tied to those same histories in sub-Saharan Africa, as chapter one outlines in more detail.

By the early nineteenth century, Mauritius housed hundreds of small and medium-sized agricultural estates, including sugar plantations, farms, and domestic dwellings. Most landowners depended on this long tradition of slaveholding and unfree labour for production and profit. Newly enslaved African peoples, mainly from Mozambique and Madagascar, enslaved South Asians, and the bonded Creole population (that is, those born on the island, often of mixed ethno-linguistic descent), performed the bulk of agricultural and domestic labour. Many homes engaged male and female unfree labourers, particularly in urban areas including the main port city, Port Louis. In 1810, during the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15), Britain's Royal Navy captured Île de France, and renamed it, again, Mauritius.<sup>14</sup> By annexing the island, the British also secured their trade routes through the western Indian Ocean to India. Robert Townsend Farquhar (1776–1830) became the first British Governor of Mauritius in 1810 (g. 1810–17; 1820–23). French

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(Mauritius: n.p., 1990). Richard Allen also provides a useful overview of this early history in the first chapter of his volume, *Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Coffee was farmed in Île Bourbon from the early eighteenth century, though sugar production remained minimal until after British occupation in 1810.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Marie Filliot, *La traite des esclaves vers les Mascaraignes au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Orstom, 1974), 96. For more precise information on European slave trading in this region, see Richard Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500–1850* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> For further details about early British colonial administration in Mauritius, including the interplay of anti-slavery activism with French colonialism prior to 1830, see Anthony Barker, *Slavery and Antislavery in Mauritius, 1810–33: The Conflict between Economic Expansion and Humanitarian Reform under British Rule* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), and Deryck Scarr, *Slaving and Slavery in the Indian Ocean* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).





When the British government captured Mauritius in 1810, the island's population consisted of approximately 6,200 white individuals (mainly of French descent), 7,100 non-white free individuals (*gens de couleurs libres*) and over 65,000 slaves.<sup>16</sup> Of the substantial population of free people of colour, most of mixed ethno-linguistic descent were manumitted slaves. However, some free people of colour who arrived in Île de France in the eighteenth century were artisans, craftsmen, or merchants from India, Madagascar, and Southeast Asia. Others were sailors or free migrants.<sup>17</sup> In 1706, there were approximately 7,154 free people of colour living in Mauritius, and by 1725, this number had increased to 14,831.<sup>18</sup> Free women and men of colour owned land, dwellings, businesses, and enslaved labourers. Some were very wealthy, and some were destitute. While they were considered a class and racial category separate from the slave population, free people of colour still experienced a great deal of racial segregation, and were made to answer to racialized colonial laws on many matters. While free women of colour are not specifically studied in this dissertation, their plight does intertwine with slavery, as highlighted in chapters two and four. Free men and women of colour were also frequently called upon to give witness testimony to police, the Commission of Eastern Enquiry (chapter two), and the Protector of Slaves and his agents (chapter three).

Key to this dissertation is the concept that early nineteenth-century slaveholding, particularly of women and girls, and anti-slavery activism in British Mauritius and the western Indian Ocean were similar to, but also divergent from, slavery and anti-slavery in the Caribbean and the Americas. Three years prior to Britain's annexation of Mauritius, the *Slave Trade Act* of 1807 was passed by British Parliament. This act abolished the slave trade in the British empire,

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<sup>16</sup> Vijaya Teelock, *Bitter Sugar: Sugar and Slavery in Nineteenth Century Mauritius* (Moka, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1998), 21.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Allen, "Marie Rozette and her World: Class, Ethnicity, Gender and Race in late Eighteenth-Century and early Nineteenth-Century Mauritius," *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 2 (2011): 352.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Allen, "Free Women of Colour and Socio-Economic Marginality in Mauritius, 1767–1830," *Slavery & Abolition* 26, no. 2 (2005): 183.

and penalized those found to be purchasing or trading enslaved peoples.<sup>19</sup> It effectively ended the importation of enslaved Africans to the Caribbean by 1808; however, as explored at more length in chapters two and four, an illicit slave trade still continued in Mauritius for nearly two more decades. In fact, Richard Allen estimates that between 1811 and 1827, over 52,000 enslaved were illegally imported to Mauritius and the Seychelles, an island chain north of the Mascarenes that was also in British possession (see Figure 2).<sup>20</sup> Edward Alpers and Frederick Cooper have also demonstrated that a marked and rapid growth in the slave trade occurred in East Africa at several points throughout the nineteenth century, well beyond the cessation of slave-trading in the Atlantic world.<sup>21</sup>

Why did an illicit slave trade persist in Mauritius? One important factor was sugar.

Though sugar cane was first introduced to Mauritius by the Dutch, and later revitalized by the

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<sup>19</sup> Key works in slavery and abolition studies that present unique arguments for slavery's decline in the Atlantic world, include Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964); Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008); Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); and Robin Blackburn, *American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (New York: Verso, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Richard Allen, "The Mascarene Slave Trade and Labour Migration in the Indian Ocean during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in ed. Gwyn Campbell, *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 39. For more about the illegal importation of slaves to and from the Mascarene Islands, East Africa, and the western Indian Ocean in the early nineteenth century, see Hubert Gerbeau, *L'océan indien n'est pas L'Atlantique: la traite illégale à Bourbon au XIXe siècle* (Chicoutimi, QC: J.-M. Tremblay, 2009); Marina Carter and Hubert Gerbeau, "Covert Slaves and Coveted Coolies in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Mascareignes," *Slavery & Abolition* 9, no. 3 (1988): 194–208; Richard Allen, "Licentious and Unbridled Proceedings: The Illegal Slave Trade to Mauritius and the Seychelles during the early Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of African History* 42, no. 1 (2001): 91–116; Robert W. Harms, ed., *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013); Gwyn Campbell, ed., *Abolition and its Aftermath in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2005); and Deryck Scarr, *Seychelles since 1770: History of a Slave and Post-Slavery Society* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> See Edward Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves in East Central Africa: Changing Patterns of International Trade in the Late Nineteenth Century* (London: Heinemann, 1975); and Frederick Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters: Plantation Labor and Agriculture in Zanzibar and Coastal Kenya, 1890-1925* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997) and *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977). Also see Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770-1873* (Oxford: James Currey, 1987).

French, it did not flourish in the island until the 1820s.<sup>22</sup> Seymour Drescher shows that by 1825, with the repeal of the preferential tariff on Caribbean sugar, Mauritian sugar exports were on par with the British Caribbean. By 1830, sugar cane production in Mauritius had doubled, while slave prices there had quadrupled.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, many of Britain's anti-slavery policies that had been introduced in the Caribbean colonies, like slavery amelioration measures affecting women and children, were also implemented in Mauritius. As chapters two and three establish, despite the prohibition on the slave trade, French-Mauritian slaveholders in this period were quite unwilling to relinquish their enslaved labourers.

Moreover, policing the slave trade among the Mascarene Islands was a complex task for British colonial authorities and the Royal Navy, and differed in some ways from their transatlantic experience. The Royal Navy was confronted with styles of slave-trading less common in the Atlantic Ocean. Smaller vessels (dhows) generally transported fewer bondspeople at a time than the larger transoceanic vessels, and variant forms of bondage present in the Indian Ocean were initially confusing to British officers, many of whom expected to only encounter dominantly male chattel slavery.<sup>24</sup> Unfree women were largely prized above unfree men in eastern Africa and Indian Ocean Africa, as chapter one explains in more detail. In some cases, slave importation also continued under the guise of contract (*engagé*) labour.

In addition, British Royal Navy anti-slavery squadrons sometimes perpetuated the continuation of bondage. Their unfree captives from illegal slaving vessels were re-bonded at the nearest port cities (frequently Port Louis) and contracted out to private residents or the colonial

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<sup>22</sup> Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen*, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Drescher, *Mighty Experiment*, 154. Vijaya Teelock has written the best and most well-rounded account of slaveholding and sugar production in Mauritius, in *Bitter Sugar: Sugar and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Mauritius* (Moka, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1998). Also see Moses Nwulia, *The History of Slavery in Mauritius and the Seychelles, 1810–1875* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1981).

<sup>24</sup> I wrote about this subject for my Master's Research Paper in History for McGill University. See Tyler Yank, "'Our Little Piratical Intentions': Reconstructing Narratives of British Abolition in East Africa, 1849-1873," (MA Thesis, McGill University, Montréal, 2013).

government, as “government slaves.” Chapter two of this dissertation explores this phenomenon at length, as well as the experiences of women and girls within these bondage systems. In addition, small and infrequent numbers of convict labourers were shipped to Mauritius from the Dutch period (1638–1710) onwards, with a significant group transported to early British Mauritius. Clare Anderson shows that between 1814 and 1837, 1,500 convicts were shipped to Mauritius from South Asia alone.<sup>25</sup> Slaveholding in the island actively persisted until 1 February 1835, with the enforcement of Britain’s Emancipation Act (1833), and the commencement of the apprenticeship system (1836–39)—this study ends shortly thereafter, in the early 1840s.

### *Definitions*

A few words on terminology and definition are needed, as multiple forms of slavery and bonded labour co-existed in the Indian Ocean world throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> Foremost, my dissertation deals almost exclusively with “chattel slaves,” defined by Suzanne Miers as persons “under the complete domination of an owner who has powers of life and death over [them], can sell and transfer [them] at will and has full control over [their] daily and domestic life,” including

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<sup>25</sup> These convicts came from the Presidencies of Bengal and Bombay, and Ceylon. See Clare Anderson, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean: Transportation from South Asia to Mauritius, 1815–53* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 6. For more about convict transportation to Mauritius and in the Indian Ocean world, see Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean world, 1790–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Marina Carter and James Ng Foong Kwong, *Abacus and Mah Jong: Sino-Mauritian Settlement and Economic Consolidation* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Lucy Frost and Colette McAlpine, eds., *From the Edges of Empire: Convict Women from beyond the British Isles* (Hobart, Tasmania: Convict Women’s Press, 2015); and Emma Christopher, Cassandra Pybus, and Marcus Rediker, eds., *Many Middle Passages: Forced Migration and the Making of the Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Chapter one outlines the different forms of enslavement common to Africa and the western Indian Ocean world.

reproduction.<sup>27</sup> As well, in chattel slavery, the enslaved person's status is hereditary—in Mauritius, slave status was inherited matrilineally. Chattel slavery is also inherently exploitative and violent. In addition to the bodily violence of being enslaved, and “the threat of violence” in the control of one person by another,<sup>28</sup> I consider “peaceful alienation from one's natal kin”<sup>29</sup> (social death) as another common form of violence. Children and adults sold into slavery would often lose contact with their birth family, village, language, and culture. In Mauritius, the enslaved came mainly from Madagascar, Mozambique, and other regions in eastern Africa—and most did not return.

Throughout this dissertation, I also use the terms “slavery/enslaved,” “bondage/bonded/bondsperson,” and “unfree” interchangeably. I refer to enslaved “labourers” and “workers” interchangeably, as well: this is meant to encompass all enslaved adults. As explained in chapter one, bondspeople in Mauritius, particularly adult men and women, were exploited for their productive (and sometimes reproductive) labour in domestic dwellings, government works, or in the fields. Thus, they were all labourers. Additionally, I purposely try to avoid the terms “slave” and “master” throughout my dissertation. As Gabrielle-Foreman et al. write, the term “master” transmits “the aspirations and values of the enslaving class,” without focusing upon the practices they engaged in (that is, enslaving fellow humans). Using “enslaved” (adjective) rather than “slave” (noun) as often as possible is also a conscious choice that serves to “disaggregate[e] the condition of being enslaved with the status of ‘being’ a slave.”<sup>30</sup> I also chose

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<sup>27</sup> Suzanne Miers, “Slavery: A Question of Definition,” in ed. Gwyn Campbell, *Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2003), 2. Also see Paul Lovejoy, “Africa and Slavery,” in *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–23.

<sup>28</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 1.

<sup>29</sup> Miers, “Slavery: A Question of Definition,” 7.

<sup>30</sup> P. Gabrielle Foreman, et al., “Writing about Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might Help,” community-sourced document, date accessed 9 April 2019, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A4TEdDgYsIX-hlKezLodMIM71My3KTN0zxRv0lQTOQs/edit>. Thank you to my wide #twitterstorian network for bringing this

not to use the term “enslaver,” due to the complexities of African and western Indian Ocean slave-trading systems, opting instead for “slaveholder.”

Studies in postcolonial history have noted the integral role that violence plays in shaping the lives of colonized and unfree peoples. Frantz Fanon posits that violence was the “natural state” of colonial rule, which was sustained through the dehumanization of colonized peoples. Fanon argues that resistance, both subtle and violent, was the only natural response by the colonized to foreign rule and subjugation.<sup>31</sup> Mahmood Mamdani similarly argues that colonialism created institutions, such as slavery and customary law, that enabled the European minority to rule—violently—over the enslaved majority.<sup>32</sup> A central tenet of this dissertation is that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the institution of slavery was sustained globally through physical and psychological violence perpetrated by slave traders, slaveholders, and sometimes the enslaved themselves. As every chapter shows, violence shaped the lives of all women and girls in bondage in Mauritius.

For the purposes of this dissertation, violence in the context of Mauritius is considered to have physical, psychological, and emotional components. Specifically, violence encompasses “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation,” a contemporary

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helpful document to my attention. For further reading on the topic of language and ethics when writing about slavery, see the list of “pieces to consult” on page 3 of the document.

<sup>31</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

<sup>32</sup> I also recognize that in some colonial settings, like early Canada, the US North, and Scotland, enslaved minorities were also subjugated. Mahmood Mamdani, “Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities: Overcoming the Political Legacy of Colonialism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, no. 4 (2001): 651–64. Also see Mamdani’s major work, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996). For more on postcolonialism and global history, see Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Special thanks to Fred Cooper for his comments on my dissertation during the re:work Summer Academy on labour, rights, and mobility, hosted by Humboldt University (Berlin) and UNSAM, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Oct–Nov 2017.

definition borrowed from the World Health Organization.<sup>33</sup> What's more, as Heidi Gengenbach demonstrates, colonized women in particular often "strategically engaged" with their oppressors, and they not only resisted colonial rule, but also negotiated and worked within dominant structures toward their own ends.<sup>34</sup> With this theoretical framework, the dissertation determines if similar reactions and relationships existed between the enslaved, colonists, and slaveholders in early British Mauritius.

### *Scope of Study*

This study begins in 1810, when Mauritius was first annexed by Britain during the Napoleonic Wars, with the onset of British colonialism in the island. The project ends roughly in 1845, well after Emancipation (1833), and following the demise of the apprenticeship scheme (1836–39), when formerly enslaved peoples finally gained freedom of mobility. This was a major thirty-five-year period of economic, political, and social change in Mauritius. New European colonists clashed with the old, new anti-slavery laws were introduced and enforced, and religious rivalry on the island intensified between the French-Catholic and English-Protestant factions. Most notably, slaveholding practices in Mauritius were beginning to shift with the introduction of slavery amelioration measures and abolitionist sentiment throughout the wider British empire.

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<sup>33</sup> Etienne G. Krug, Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Anthony B. Zwi, and Rafael Lozano, eds., *World Report on Violence and Health* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization, 2002), 5.

<sup>34</sup> Heidi Gengenbach, "'What My Heart Wanted': Gendered Stories of Early Colonial Encounters in Southern Mozambique," in eds. Susan Geiger, Nakanyike Musisi, and Jean Marie Allman, *Women in Colonial African Histories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 19–47.



In this context, my project's major focus is on British colonial activities, bodies, inhabitants, and archives, scrutinizing slaveholding and abolition from the perspective of British colonialism.<sup>35</sup> It concentrates on three British imperial bodies that operated in Mauritius: the Commission of Eastern Enquiry, the Protector of Slaves office, and Protestant missionaries affiliated with the London Missionary Society (LMS), and to a lesser degree, Lady Mico's Charity. These bodies were chosen because they were very active in the thirty-five-year period concerned (1810–1845), and because each of these bodies intervened in slaveholding practices and interacted with bondspeople in Mauritius. They were also chosen because the archival collections for each of these offices or groups contain extremely rich accounts of enslaved women and girls living in the island in the early nineteenth century. The archival collections for each of these colonial bodies seemed like natural starting points for my research, and have significantly informed the chronology and direction of my study.

I have chiefly used archival primary source manuscripts retrieved from repositories in Mauritius and Britain, as well as digitized archival records held in the UK Parliamentary Papers online database. Throughout, I systematically sought out enslaved women and girls, initially by using simple keywords like “woman,” “female,” or “girl” in electronic catalogue searches. In many cases, I also looked for feminine first names to identify documents or collections of documents that pertained to an enslaved woman or girl. This method, though imperfect, first led me to the various Protector of Slaves reports and the recommendations and appendices for the Commission of Eastern Enquiry. Both manuscript collections are rich with accounts of enslavement in the 1820s and early 1830s. The *Mauritius Government Gazette*, correspondence between British-Mauritian governors and their superiors in London, and other legal records

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<sup>35</sup> In terms of periodization, my study picks up where Megan Vaughan's *Creating the Creole Island* (2005), which focuses on French colonial Mauritius in the eighteenth century, leaves off.

further clarified how colonial governance in Mauritius worked, and through them I identified the major concerns of British agents, as they pertained to slavery prior to emancipation. London Missionary Society (LMS) archival materials—including correspondence, pamphlets, annual reports, and school documents—revealed yet another layer of British colonialism and intervention in the island.

The geographical scope of this project is regionally-specific. It focuses only on events that took place in Mauritius or nearby coastal waters, though I do offer comparison to events occurring in the wider Indian Ocean and in certain Atlantic colonies during the same period. Although the neighbouring islands of Réunion (Île Bourbon) and Rodrigues appear occasionally in the archival material, they are for the most part omitted, due to fieldwork constraints. Comparison to slaveholding and colonial activities in Île Bourbon, in particular, would have certainly enriched my findings, but were beyond the scope of this doctoral project.

Each chapter examines a specific archival collection that reflects an aspect of British colonial intervention in Mauritian slaveholding, while weaving in descriptive accounts of enslaved women and girls implicated in these processes. Chapter one serves to establish many of the dissertation's central themes, including slave motherhood and maternity, women's unfree labour, violence, and resistance to slavery. It does so through the lens of a specific and complex legal case from 1823–24, that of a bondswoman named Sophie who was accused of arson and theft, and sentenced to die. Using the French-Mauritian attorney general's collection of correspondence and trial notes, housed at the National Archives (Kew), this chapter outlines the case, the actors involved, and Sophie's treatment—as a pregnant woman—during the investigation. It explores how slave maternity and motherhood were perceived in racialized economic, medical, and legal terms in the early nineteenth-century British empire. Vestiges of

French colonial law related to slaveholding are also examined in light of Britain's annexation of the island in 1810. In addition, this chapter queries "resistance" to slavery, and explores wider patterns of subversion and delinquency in Mauritius, particularly as they relate to women and girls.

Chapter two moves into the later 1820s to examine the activities and recommendations of the Commission of Eastern Enquiry (CEE), a British imperial body tasked with investigating colonial governance and slavery in Mauritius, as well as in the Cape Colony and Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka). This chapter explores the idea of freedom and conditions of freedom for the enslaved through the life stories of several enslaved women, pulled from the appendices to the Commission's reports. These dense appendices are housed in London (at Kew) and in the National Archives of Mauritius, while many of the final reports appear in the UK's Parliamentary Papers online database. Part One focuses primarily on the account of Marie Saladin, a woman who was enslaved in Mauritius after living for nearly forty years as a free person of colour. Through Saladin's case—information about which appears several times in the CEE's archival collection and in later correspondence by the Protector of Slaves—the chapter reflects on manumission laws and the nature of slaveholding in Mauritius just prior to the introduction of amelioration measures later implemented on the CEE's recommendation. These topics are further illustrated in the case studies of six individual women and their narratives of bondage and freedom. Part Two explores another major area of concern for the CEE, and one that again complicates the subject of freedom: the plight of recaptive Africans and "government slaves" in Mauritius. Using a wide array of colonial government records, this section analyzes manumission, labour, and the unique experiences of women and girls in recaptivity before 1830.

The Protector of Slaves forms the subject of chapter three. Following the CEE's recommendation, this office was created in Mauritius in 1829 as a slavery amelioration measure, and as an avenue for enslaved peoples to formally register grievances with a British colonial authority. This chapter follows Protector Richard Thomas' first year on the island (1829–30), and locates trends in the outcome of cases brought before him. Unfree women frequently visited a slave protection office to complain of illegal corporal punishment inflicted on them or their children by French-Mauritian slaveholders. However, the Protector of Slaves dismissed the majority of complaints as false or lacking evidence. This chapter revisits important themes from chapter one, including slave motherhood, violence against women and girls, and resistance to bondage, using the rich archival records housed in London (Kew) and in Mauritius. I also emphasize the legally pluralistic nature of slaveholding in the late 1820s and early 1830s in the island, and the animosity that French-Mauritian land- and slaveholders, and judicial elites like the attorney general, continued to demonstrate towards British authorities on the eve of emancipation.

The final chapter re-explores the entire period of this study (c. 1810–45) in a comprehensive examination of British Protestant missionary work in Mauritius, and in particular, religious and elementary education initiatives for people of colour, bondspeople, and ex-slaves. The work of London Missionary Society (LMS) Reverend Jean Le Brun is the central focus of Part One of this chapter. This section uses the rich archival collection of his correspondence, annual reports, and school-related materials stored at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London to explore early LMS mission schools in Mauritius. This chapter also highlights the writings of Charles Telfair to examine the intersections of religious instruction and the anti-slavery movement in the Indian Ocean world between 1820 and 1832.

Animosity between the French-Catholic and Protestant factions in the island (an extension of the French-English colonial tension described in chapter three) continued well into the late 1830s and 1840s, and impacted the success of LMS initiatives. Violence, and the implications of religious and elementary instruction for women and girls, are explored in more depth, and gendered differences to education for girls and boys are highlighted throughout. Part Two of this chapter outlines the history of the “Negro Education Grant” and Lady Mico’s Charity, imperial bodies that contributed financially to schooling for the newly emancipated in Mauritius. It was hoped that “civil order” among the population could be maintained post-emancipation by offering religious instruction and literacy to the formerly enslaved and the new apprenticed class. Le Brun and his LMS network were employed to open new schools for boys and girls across the island well into the early 1840s, where this study ends.

The unmediated voices of the enslaved remain absent from the dissertation. That is, all archival documents that contain accounts by enslaved women and girls were in English or French, and physically hand-written on to paper by Anglophone or Francophone clerks who in their transcriptions altered and formalized the exact wording, tone, and language used by the original unfree speaker. Most enslaved peoples in Mauritius were illiterate and their mother tongues were rarely English or French. Sometimes translators were used by colonial agents to access information from those speaking non-European languages—but this is not reflected in the archival documents. The exact tone and wording have been lost. Thus, by using the descriptions and accounts as they appear in the colonial records, I have worked to centre the enslaved person herself in the rewriting of her narrative.

## Chapter One

### Quiet Strength, Loud Defiance: Assessing Bondwomen's Labour, Maternity, and Resistance in early British Mauritius

In the early morning of 20 March 1823, a young enslaved woman named Sophie quietly re-entered the room she shared with two other enslaved women, Nina and Juliette, and extinguished her lantern. Moments later, a guest in the home, Clementine Legars, burst into the room to alert Sophie, Nina, and Juliette to a “glow” coming from the ceiling. The owner of the home, medical doctor Amédée Bonsergent, awoke, and the entire household began to hurriedly move furniture and valuables as the fire spread. The next morning, local police officers arrested Sophie, and took her to the *bagne* (local jail and workhouse). Sophie was initially accused of arson, but Bonsergent later claimed that, in the chaos of the fire, she also stole 312 *piastres* from a drawer in the bedroom he shared with his wife. He admitted that Sophie enjoyed a high position of trust in the household, and that she was given a key to the main bedroom and the responsibility for saving precious possessions and valuables during the blaze. Sophie was interrogated and detained for over five months. The police questioned numerous witnesses, including other bonded and free people of colour living on or nearby the estate. Sophie's “lover,” a free man of colour named Jean Gombault, was among those questioned, and 140 *piastres* were found concealed in the roof of his dwelling.<sup>1</sup> On 17 September 1823, Sophie was found guilty of arson and theft, and condemned to die.

The majority of the archival records related to this case are held at the National Archives, Kew (UK), in a bundle of documents that curiously date from 6 November 1823—nearly two

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<sup>1</sup> The wording in the Attorney General's correspondence implies that Gombault lived adjacent to or very close to Bonsergent's property. The records related to this case are held among those for the Treasury Solicitor and HM Procurator General's Department at the National Archives (Kew) (hereafter NA), in ff. 155–207, TS 25/2038.

months after Sophie's conviction.<sup>2</sup> At that time, the Attorney General of Mauritius, a French-Mauritian holding the highest judicial position on the island, wrote a letter to the British Governor of Mauritius, Galbraith Lowry Cole (g. 1823–28), asking him to reconsider Sophie's death sentence on legal grounds, due to the fact that Sophie was probably six or seven months pregnant when the fire and theft occurred. Sophie's pregnancy and health were hardly mentioned in the interrogation records from March to September 1823, which were appended to the Attorney General's letter.

Sophie's trial and the events surrounding it speak directly to a number of themes central to the study of enslaved women in early British Mauritius, including labour, reproduction, maternity, and resistance. This chapter explores how each of these themes impacted the lived experiences of Sophie and other bondswomen, while at the same time illustrating how they created the conditions for Britain's imperial "interventions" discussed in the following chapters. The chapter begins by highlighting three important thematic intersections before turning to a closer analysis of what happened to Sophie in 1823. First, it explores how colonial authorities, doctors, and slaveholders—in Mauritius and Britain's Atlantic colonies—perceived the maternity of enslaved women in racialized economic, medical, and legal terms.<sup>3</sup> This is central to understanding the forms of violence these women experienced. Second, the chapter situates Sophie's maternity within a wider examination of racialized law in Mauritius, including regulations enshrined in contemporary legal codes like the *Code Noir* (Black Code).

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<sup>2</sup> f. 155–207, TS 25/2038, NA.

<sup>3</sup> My work also contributes to and draws upon the work of Caribbean and colonial North American historians who have written extensively on enslaved motherhood, womanhood, and archiving in slavery studies. For example, see Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); and Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). See also the special issue of *Slavery & Abolition* 38, no. 2 (2017), "Mothering Slaves: Motherhood, Childlessness, and the Care of Children in Atlantic Slave Societies."

Third, this chapter queries the subject of slave “resistance,” and acts that can be read as such, by examining Sophie’s alleged criminality. Its goal is not to reopen the investigation into Sophie’s guilt or innocence, but rather to ask: can Sophie’s acts (of arson and theft, specifically) be read as resistance to her slave status? For example, scholars have defined resistance to slavery in the Indian Ocean world as both complex and manifestly subtle.<sup>4</sup> Verbal defiance (“talking back”), purposely performing work slowly (“go-slows”), and petitioning to colonial authorities were forms of non-violent resistance that occurred in Mauritius and the wider region. Theft, arson, and marronage (running away) were more openly disruptive acts also carried out by bondspeople. How does Sophie’s case fit into broader narratives of enslavement and resistance on the island? How does her position as an expectant mother nuance or complicate her story? This chapter demonstrates that there was interplay between maternity, on the one hand, and delinquent or resistant behaviour perpetrated by enslaved women, on the other. As illustrated throughout the dissertation, Sophie’s case also reflects wider patterns of violence perpetrated against enslaved women both in Mauritius and in Atlantic slaveholding colonies.

Methodologically, this chapter acknowledges that the voices of enslaved women are scant in the colonial archives. Their words, beliefs, and actions were rarely recorded. Exceptions were made for women who were witnesses to a crime, who were under investigation (like Sophie), or who were otherwise antagonistic to authorities. Some of these women were pregnant or mothers, and this must be accounted for when historians assess their actions. As Marisa Fuentes emphasizes in her work on the forms of sexual labour performed by women of colour in Barbados, scholars *must* consider “the excruciating conditions faced by enslaved women to

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<sup>4</sup> Gwyn Campbell and Edward Alpers, “Introduction: Slavery, Forced Labour and Resistance in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia,” in eds. Edward Alpers, Gwyn Campbell, and Michael Salman, *Resisting Bondage in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2007), 2.



understand the significance of their behaviours.”<sup>5</sup> While the Mauritian archives are not necessarily forthcoming on the subject of waged or unfree sexual labour practiced by bonded women, we may deduce that, as a woman in a colonial jail in the third trimester of pregnancy, Sophie likely experienced some of the “excruciating conditions” Fuentes points to. As a pregnant woman engaged in unfree domestic labour, Sophie may have also experienced these conditions prior to the events of 20 March 1823. Thus, this first chapter uses the 1823 arrest, interrogation, and sentencing of Sophie as a case study to reflect upon how labour, maternity, violence, and resistance were perceived by colonial authorities in early British Mauritius.

### *Defining Enslaved Women’s Labour*

Slaveholding practices in Mauritius intersect with those in two broad global regions: East Africa and the western Indian Ocean world, and the British and French Caribbean world. The colonial unfree labour systems that proliferated in Mauritius were shaped by the experiences of British and French colonists in the Caribbean, and slaveholding conditions in both locations were very similar. As such, in this context, scholarship about empire in one sphere can shed light on the other. The following sections will use approaches from both regional historiographies to paint a more complete portrait of women’s labour in Mauritius. Identifying the diversity of labour roles that enslaved women and girls performed is central to an exploration of motherhood and patterns of violence.

Foremost, in these two global regions, the labour performed by enslaved women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was both productive and reproductive in nature. This means

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<sup>5</sup> Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 8.

women in bondage generated profits for their owners through their labour, and also augmented their slaveholder's property by giving birth to children who were assigned their mother's slave status.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the burden of enslaved women was two-fold: to give birth to and successfully raise healthy children (who often did not survive infancy), and to constantly perform productive work, whether in the fields or in domestic dwellings. Agricultural work, cooking, sewing, mat-making, and caring for one's infant, for instance, were often simultaneous duties.<sup>7</sup>

Further, women were highly valued precisely *because* they were capable of performing many of the same labour-intensive tasks as men—like heavy fieldwork, for example—as well as this wide range of other activities. Slaveholders in many societies introduced bonded girls at a very young age to domestic chores, crafts, cooking, and child-care strategies, and girls would also learn these skills from their mothers or female family members. In addition to agricultural and domestic tasks, enslaved women across sub-Saharan Africa were also assigned specialized roles as “concubines, entertainers, prostitutes, brewers, washerwomen, and seamstresses.”<sup>8</sup> The ability to fulfill these various roles made enslaved women “profitable” in many different ways. In Mauritius, it was not uncommon for slaveholders to force enslaved women to work in the home, and to “rent out” their skills and services to neighbours for a fee.<sup>9</sup> With their extensive talents and capabilities, women and girls were thus prized.

In sub-Saharan Africa, three interconnected forms of bondage and slave-trading commonly operated, two of which prioritized enslaved women and girls. First, the African

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<sup>6</sup> For example, matrilineal slave status was encoded in the *Code Noir* (1723), a set of laws governing slaveholding in French colonies. The *Code Noir* is discussed at more length below.

<sup>7</sup> In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, Clare Robertson and Martin Klein's edited volume *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997) was one of the first volumes to really examine these gendered differences in labour. Also see Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph Miller, eds., *Women in Slavery: Africa, the Indian Ocean World, and the Medieval North Atlantic*, vol. 1 (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Campbell, Miers, and Miller, *Women in Slavery*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> The Protector of Slaves records for Mauritius (1829–35) reveal numerous instances of unfree women being forced to rent out their labour as washerwomen and day labourers. Many were punished if they did not manage to bring home a specified sum by the end of the day or week.

continent's internal slave trade—which saw slaves being traded across the Sahara to the west coast of the continent, and throughout East Africa and its islands—tended to absorb more women and girls than men and boys. In this “internal” African trade, women were in high demand and consistently “brought higher prices.”<sup>10</sup> Paul Lovejoy posits that, in fact, men and boys were more frequently sold into and made available to the European slave export trade *because* women and girls were so highly valued internally; they simply were not for sale in the same numbers as males.<sup>11</sup> Second, Muslim slave-trading practices in North and Northeast Africa also prioritized women.<sup>12</sup> Young women were more likely to be sold into slavery by their parents or husbands, often as “pawns” or for money and resources in periods of crisis, like famine, drought, or war.<sup>13</sup> The third form of enslavement practiced in the African continent was chattel slavery, similar to that practiced in Mauritius, colonial America, and the Caribbean sugar islands. Chattel slavery favoured men and boys, and the Atlantic–European export market from West Africa generally “purchased male slaves by a margin of at least two to one.”<sup>14</sup>

Women were also highly valued for their ability to biologically reproduce, which was tied to the expansion of an owner's property and lineage. Margaret Strobel identifies three dominant forms of reproductive labour performed by enslaved women in sub-Saharan Africa: biological reproduction, “daily reproduction” (which included sexual services to both slaveholders and male peers), and the reproduction of “relations of production by the

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<sup>10</sup> Robertson and Klein, *Women and Slavery in Africa*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>12</sup> Robertson and Klein, *Women and Slavery in Africa*, 3–5.

<sup>13</sup> See Campbell, Miers and Miller, *Women and Slavery* for a more complete picture of women in slavery on the African continent. In Chapter 11 of that volume, Edward Alpers writes about forms of familial pawnship through the narrative of a young Yao girl named Swema who was sold into slavery to passing traders by (and along with) her mother. The story demonstrates how slave traders accumulated high numbers of slaves during periods of famine and war, when men were killed and women were left with no resources for themselves nor their children. Swema's mother died on the caravan journey from the interior to the East African coast, and Swema, who was thought too ill to be transported and sold in Zanzibar, was left to die, only to be discovered and rescued by French missionaries who recorded her story.

<sup>14</sup> Robertson & Klein, *Women and Slavery in Africa*, 4.

transmission of the ideology supporting the whole social structure.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, enslaved women passed on knowledge of these forms of reproduction and modes of survival within the institution of slavery to their children, who then perpetuated the same system. Strobel thus highlights just how deeply ingrained and oppressive systems of bondage were for women.

Importantly, Charmaine Nelson illustrates that many enslaved women—in performing reproductive labour—experienced sexual coercion and assault at the hands of men, including slaveholders, neighbours, and peers. This was true throughout European slaveholding colonies. As such, reproductive labour was frequently coupled with psychological injury, as women were forced to “carry and bear the interracial children of their enslavers/rapists.” Nelson writes that this was yet another “endemic and catastrophic dimension” of the trauma of slavery.<sup>16</sup> Women’s work—productive and reproductive—was unequivocally vital to the institution of slavery. As the following section explores, the value placed upon this work varied from colony to colony, and intersected with questions of motherhood, law, and resistance.

### *Pregnancy and Childbirth across Colonies*

From 1810, Indian Ocean Mauritius joined the British Caribbean colonies in the production of sugar with enslaved labour. As highlighted above, the history of slavery in Mauritius is sometimes better examined alongside the rich historiography of American and Caribbean

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<sup>15</sup> Robertson and Klein, *Women and Slavery in Africa*, 9. See Margaret Strobel’s chapter titled “Slavery and Reproductive Labor in Mombasa” in Robertson and Klein’s same volume.

<sup>16</sup> Charmaine Nelson, “Innocence Curtailed: Reading Maternity and Sexuality as Labor in Canadian Representations of Black Girls,” in eds. Gwyn Campbell and Elizabeth Elbourne, *Sex, Power, Slavery* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014), 304–5.

slaveholding (mostly British and French). This section therefore outlines the parallels and dissimilarities between the two regions as they relate to slave reproduction and maternity.

Despite a marked decline in the enslaved population in Mauritius throughout the early nineteenth century—Richard Allen estimates that this population declined from approximately 80,000 in 1815–17, to 63,000 by the early 1830s<sup>17</sup>—slaveholders in the island do not appear to have been especially preoccupied with slave reproduction. This is particularly true when compared with pronatalist measures undertaken by slaveholders in the Americas in the same period, where plantation owners and overseers introduced methods to encourage reproduction among enslaved women, and sometimes punished those suspected of infanticide or abortion, which were less common in early British Mauritius. In fact, in the early nineteenth century, many slaveholders in Mauritius viewed pregnancy and child-rearing as burdensome for enslaved women, disrupting their productive labour and time. According to correspondence by the commissioners of Eastern Enquiry, who visited Mauritius from 1826 to 1828, an enslaved woman's value in Mauritius was more commonly determined according to her capacity for productive labour, not her “breeding” capacities.<sup>18</sup>

This contrasts sharply with reports from the Caribbean, where decline among British slaveholding colonies was always a concern. When the slave population was too low or in a steady decline, certain Caribbean slaveholders and plantation owners adopted increasingly frenzied pronatalist measures to heighten reproduction among their bondswomen, particularly after 1815. Indeed, when the slave trade was banned in British colonies in 1807, mixed fears arose in relation to the declining slave population and reduced access to unfree labourers. Who

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Allen, “Capital, Illegal Slaves, Indentured Labourers and the Creation of a Sugar Plantation Economy in Mauritius, 1810–60,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth Studies* 36, no. 2 (2008): 154.

<sup>18</sup> Colebrooke and Blair to Howick, 17 December 1831, CO 167/118, NA, as quoted in Vijaya Teelock, *Bitter Sugar: Sugar and Slavery in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Mauritius* (Moka, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1998), 177.

would harvest the sugar if new slaves could no longer be imported? Would mothers, giving birth to enslaved children, sustain the institution of slavery? How could they possibly do so if, according to popular beliefs (and explained at more length below), enslaved women were poor, reckless mothers and “libertines”? Megan Vaughan, writing in the context of Mauritius but no less pertinent for the British Caribbean colonies, puts it best:

[...] by the last quarter of the eighteenth century none of the accounts we have of slave maternity can be divorced from the larger debates around the morality and viability of the slave regime itself. The ‘bad slave mother’ could be employed on both sides of the slavery debate, either embedded in the antislavery argument (life for the slave woman is so miserable that she must deny her natural instincts and refuse to bring a child into the world), or it could be mobilized in the defense of slavery (slave women are not human - they lack maternal instinct and even kill their own babies).<sup>19</sup>

In nineteenth-century colonial Jamaica, some slaveholders offered incentives to enslaved women to bear children. For example, one Jamaican planter named Dr. Collins recommended that bondswomen be granted freedom if they bore six or more children.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Bernard Moitt writes that planters in Barbados in 1796 were encouraged to pay “five shillings at the birth of every woman’s first child,” a practice that was also common among slaveholders in the Leeward Islands (consisting of the present-day Virgin Islands, Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Martin, and Guadeloupe). Some French planters in Saint-Domingue (present-

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<sup>19</sup> Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 139.

<sup>20</sup> Maureen Elgersman, *Unyielding Spirits: Black Women and Slavery in early Canada and Jamaica* (New York: Gardland Pub., 1999), 86; Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 94.

day Haiti) exerted exceptionally harsh pressure on enslaved women to reproduce. Moitt traces letters between an absentee plantation owner in Paris and his *gérant* (estate manager) in Saint-Domingue in which the owner ordered that, if a certain unfree woman's baby died at birth, both she and the midwife were to be whipped, and the woman was to be "placed in iron collars until she became pregnant again."<sup>21</sup> Few examples of these measures appear in the historiography for Mauritius.

Of course, most historical research to date on slave pregnancy and maternity in Mauritius has relied on the accounts of European visitors and inhabitants, or snippets of life assembled from court cases and police records, like those pertaining to Sophie. Jacques Arago, a French writer, artist, and explorer, visited Mauritius between 1818 and 1820, and published his accounts of the island in a treatise in 1823.<sup>22</sup> In these accounts, he included some unique information about childbirth and childcare among free and unfree women of colour, but his writing also demonstrates many of the problematic literary and medical tropes of the period relating to enslaved women and fertility. For example, Arago wrote that in Mauritius "the women are very fruitful," and that some women of colour had upwards of twenty-five children, though, he added, the average was closer to thirteen. He further stated that the average number of live births by "Creole women" was four or five, while "black women, whose conduct is not too licentious," had six to eight children.<sup>23</sup> Arago mentioned two cases of multiple births among women of colour on the island, though he does not specify whether the mothers were free or enslaved. The first was the case of a "negress" (I posit here that this woman was likely enslaved) giving birth to quintuplets (five live births), though the infants only survived a few weeks. The second was the

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<sup>21</sup> Moitt, *Women and Slavery*, 95.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Arago, *Narrative of a Voyage Round the World in the Uranie and Physicienne Corvettes, commanded by Captain Freycinet, during the years 1817, 1818, 1819, and 1820; on a scientific expedition undertaken by order of the French government, in a series of letters to a friend* (London: Treuttel and Wurtz, Treuttel, Jun. and Richter, 1823).

<sup>23</sup> Arago, *Narrative of a Voyage Round the World*, 134–5.

case of a “mulatto” woman who had seven births that resulted in thirteen children.<sup>24</sup> Of course, these two cases and the birthing numbers may be embellished or inaccurate, as Arago did not provide his sources for this information in his texts. Due to a dearth of scholarly research on the subject of childbirth in nineteenth-century Mauritius, it is very difficult to say whether this report is representative of birthing practices among the population more broadly.

Perceptions of black enslaved women as “promiscuous” and prone to disease also affected how slaveholders, colonial elites, and visitors understood, regulated, and wrote about fertility.<sup>25</sup> Barbara Bush writes that planters in Caribbean and colonial American societies frequently blamed low slave birth rates on disease and polygamy.<sup>26</sup> In reality, declines in reproduction among enslaved women were more likely attributable to other factors, like poor health, infertility, and occasionally, women avoiding pregnancy and intercourse, or engaging in abortion or infanticide. Contemporary scholars and physicians have also linked irregular menstruation to stress and trauma.<sup>27</sup> These factors may have impacted low birth rates in the Caribbean, particularly on harsher plantations where physical violence and traumatic bodily experiences were more widespread. Misconceptions about childbirth also proliferated in this period: it was widely and wrongly believed by colonial physicians that “African women [...]

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<sup>24</sup> Arago, *Narrative of a Voyage Round the World*, 134–5.

<sup>25</sup> This subject is explored very well by Katherine Paugh in “Rationalizing Reproduction: Race, Disease, and Fertility in the British Caribbean and the Atlantic World during the Age of Abolition, 1763-1833,” (PhD Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society: 1650-1838* (Kingston, Jamaica: Heinemann Publishers (Caribbean), 1990), Chapter 7.

<sup>27</sup> See Nillni Yi et al., “Menstrual Cycle Effects on Psychological Symptoms in Women with PTSD,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 28, no. 1 (February 2015): 1–7; William To and Margaret Wong, “The Relationship of Physical Trauma and Surgical Stress to Menstrual Dysfunction,” *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 40, no.1. (2000): 48–53. Marie Jenkins Schwartz explores how regular menstruation and the presence of “menstrual disorders” in enslaved women were sometimes carefully tracked by slave holders in the Antebellum South (though the physiology of menstruation was still poorly understood by doctors). See Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), Chapter 3.



gave birth to children ‘with little or no difficulty’ and in ‘rapid succession.’”<sup>28</sup>

In Mauritius, Arago wrote that “this fertility [referring to the two cases of multiple births] is the more surprising, as libertinism with these women is not looked upon as vice, and they give themselves up to it as if they had nothing to fear from its baneful effects.”<sup>29</sup> Arago’s descriptions of women of colour as “licentious” and “libertine” fit neatly into the wider use of racialized medical tropes by colonial officials and physicians in this period. Critical race studies also point to these white misperceptions of black women as insentient as an explanation for the catastrophic mistreatment, neglect, and violence towards black women like Sophie, by white colonists, during pregnancy and childbirth, and more broadly in daily life.<sup>30</sup> Highly moralizing conceptions of black women’s bodies informed plantation medicine and broader ideas about female sexuality and reproduction across the British empire well into the nineteenth century.

Furthermore, despite the illegality of slave-trading after 1807, it seems that Mauritian landowners in the 1820s did not lack a steady supply of unfree labour, unlike their New World counterparts. Many historians have shown that an illegal chattel slave trade continued steadily between the East African coast, Madagascar, and the Mascarene Islands well into the 1840s.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, Mauritian slaveholders were more concerned with women’s productive rather than reproductive labour, and thus paid relatively less attention to slave maternity and pregnancy. What’s more, while the corporal punishment of enslaved women in Mauritius was eventually

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<sup>28</sup> Bush, *Slave Women*, 133.

<sup>29</sup> Arago, *Narrative of a voyage round the world*, 134–5.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Ian Haney-López, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and David Brion Davis, *In the Image of God: Religion, Moral Values, and Our Heritage of Slavery* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), Part Four.

<sup>31</sup> Chapter two of this dissertation explores the illicit trade at more length. Many historians have argued that, after the 1807 ban on slave-trading, illegal slave-trading continued in the Mascarene Islands and Indian Ocean Africa. See Gwyn Campbell, ed., *Abolition and its Aftermath in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2005); and Robert Harms, Bernard Freamon, and David Blight, eds., *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

outlawed in the late 1820s, Vijaya Teelock posits that pregnant labourers and new mothers generally experienced mixed treatment at the hands of plantation owners and slaveholders. Some permitted enslaved women more time to care for newborns, and permitted them to raise their children in their own dwellings and on their own plots of land. Others forced bondswomen to return to heavy agricultural work shortly after giving birth, with little thought spared for the infants.<sup>32</sup> As the Protector of Slaves reports for 1829 to 1835 highlight, many bonded women in Mauritius visited slave protection offices to complain about being beaten while pregnant, or not being given adequate time to care for their infants. Their grievances and the Protector's responses to them are explored at length in chapter three.

Reports from colonial physicians who studied slave populations on islands like Saint-Domingue, Barbados, and Mauritius from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries equally highlight that the physical and psychological conditions of enslavement had adverse effects on expectant mothers and infants. In 1788, Jean Dazille, a French doctor in Saint-Domingue, observed that a combination of factors, including poor nutrition, poor sanitation, inexperienced midwives, and a general lack of health care contributed to a woman's inability to conceive, or to carry a foetus to full term.<sup>33</sup> In 1813, the Chief Medical Officer of Mauritius, a Dr. Burke, reported similar conditions:

Female slaves lived in huts made with palisades of mud. Only a thin wall separated the two rooms of the huts; one contained a bed while the other was used for cooking. A fire was kept going all night and [it was] felt that 'the smoke ... must be detrimental to

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<sup>32</sup> Teelock, *Bitter Sugar*, 177.

<sup>33</sup> Jean Dazille, *Observations sur le tetanos* (Paris : Didot, 1776).

infants.’ During delivery, other women helped or ‘an old negress’ was ‘kept for the purpose.’<sup>34</sup>

He also reported that few bonded women had access to midwives or medical professionals. Burke recommended to the Governor that mothers be provided with adequate cloth for diapers, and that a nurse be made available to them.<sup>35</sup> This advice went largely unheeded.

Though white colonists, physicians, and visitors, like Jacques Arago and Dr. Burke, sometimes got the details right, they often failed to paint an accurate overall picture of local health conditions, including maternal practices among enslaved women. Sasha Turner, in her ground-breaking work *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica*, suggests that European doctors aimed to “restructure” enslaved women’s childbirth practices to conform to European medical practices. As such, white doctors and colonists were quick to disavow what they saw as dangerous or “dirty” childbirth methods. In Jamaica, for example, the “huts” that colonists frequently wrote about were sites where “assistance networks and herbal remedies flourished,” while the smoke and fires “were essential to the birth customs that thrived within the private residences of the enslaved.”<sup>36</sup> Eurocentrism in the medical field blinded Europeans to non-Western forms of medical knowledge.

In addition to reflecting these Eurocentric biases, the writings of Arago and some Mauritian slaveholders also demonstrate a discursive connection—one that was becoming increasingly popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—between enslaved women’s reproduction, the sustainability of slaveholding, and political economy.<sup>37</sup> On this subject, Arago argued that the slave trade ban in 1807 came “by surprise upon the Isle of France,

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<sup>34</sup> From CO 167/118, NA, as summarized in Teelock, *Bitter Sugar*, 176.

<sup>35</sup> Teelock, *Bitter Sugar*, 176.

<sup>36</sup> Turner, *Contested Bodies*, 25.

<sup>37</sup> For an extensive analysis of British abolitionist rhetoric related to the biological reproduction of enslaved women, see Turner, *Contested Bodies*, Chapter 1.

which was not allowed any of the preparatory delays granted by Great Britain to her own colonies.”<sup>38</sup> As a result of this “surprise” ban, according to Arago, the unfree women on the island could not sustain the slave population, as they, “being devoted, either from instinct or lasciviousness, to the pleasures of a much more considerable number of males, are scarcely fruitful, and always unhealthy.”<sup>39</sup> Somewhat contradicting his earlier claims that women were reproducing wildly, Arago here suggests that bondswomen were failing to reproduce because they were hypersexual. He blamed frequent miscarriages among the enslaved population on “nocturnal excursions” in which, he claimed, women habitually danced and partook in any number of “licentious” activities throughout the night, rather than sleeping.<sup>40</sup> What’s more, he claimed that abortion was frequent among “the negro women” because they did not wish to be separated, due to pregnancy, from the “great gang of negroes” who worked in the fields. Thus, Arago wrote, pregnant enslaved women would often “meet with serious accidents” because they had a “general aversion [to] the duties of maternity.”<sup>41</sup>

Arago never cited sources for his information, but he was repeating and publishing some of the common medical and gendered stereotypes about unfree women that he no doubt picked up in conversation with the various colonial elites he dined and stayed with during his visit to Mauritius. Perhaps Arago was informed (about slaveholding practices and poor reproduction among bondswomen post-1807) by a pernicious French-Mauritian landowner who resented Britain’s presence in Mauritius and the anti-slavery measures introduced to the island after 1810. In any event, black enslaved women were commonly painted as uncivilized, non-maternal, and instinctual—stereotypes familiar to contemporary historians of slavery. Women alone—not their

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<sup>38</sup> Arago, *Narrative of a voyage round the world*, 141.

<sup>39</sup> Arago, *Narrative of a voyage round the world*, 141.

<sup>40</sup> Arago, *Narrative of a voyage round the world*, 141–2.

<sup>41</sup> Arago, *Narrative of a voyage round the world*, 141–2.

environments, the conditions they lived in, or the daily violence they experienced—were blamed for miscarriages, child death, and non-maternal behaviour.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, while labour and recovery from childbirth were (and are) immensely strenuous and painful, black women did not experience these events in the same way as most white women. Medical practitioners in nineteenth-century England advised “lying-in” periods of many weeks to protect upper-class mothers from miscarriage, and from jarring activities like lifting or bending down. Enslaved women had no such luxury. While some slaveholders in the Caribbean and in Mauritius permitted bondswomen up to thirty days for rest, others forced them to continue working throughout the final months of pregnancy, and to return to manual labour shortly after childbirth.<sup>43</sup> In Sophie’s case, for example, the authorities suspended her interrogation and trial proceedings for forty days while she gave birth. By the standards of early nineteenth-century Mauritius, this was a generous amount of recovery time.<sup>44</sup> Afua Cooper draws a very compelling portrait of childbirth and pain for enslaved women in colonial North America—one that is also applicable to Mauritius:

When a slave woman became pregnant, the tensions, cruelties, and contradictions inherent in slavery must have become paramount. A woman slows down as her pregnancy advances. She often experiences ill health. It is a time when she is most vulnerable, and needs as much care and nurturing as she can get, for her own benefit and that of the fetus. Slave women did not have such comforts.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Vaughan reports that in 1776, there were approximately 7,772 adult enslaved women on the island, and 12,346 enslaved men. Thus, many years before full emancipation, the slave population—based on these uneven sex ratios—was not internally sustainable. Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, 135.

<sup>43</sup> Moitt, *Woman and Slavery*, 94.

<sup>44</sup> Sophie likely gave birth in jail. See ff. 155–207, TS 25/2038, NA.

<sup>45</sup> Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of Angelique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal* (Toronto: Harpers Collins Canada, 2011), 167.

This point is crucial to a historical understanding of enslaved motherhood and maternity in Mauritius and further afield. One can speculate that Sophie, as a pregnant woman and new mother, experienced many of these “tensions [and] cruelties” while in jail and while living in the Bonsergent household. As well, there were no major pronatalist measures or incentives universally put in place in the island, as had occurred in some British and French Caribbean colonies. Such were the conditions for enslaved women in 1820s Mauritius, thus setting the stage for a closer analysis of Sophie, and her arrest, interrogation, sentencing.

### *Considering Resistance and Maternity*

In many British slaveholding colonies, both the productive and reproductive labour performed by enslaved women was crucial to the effective running of a plantation, estate, or domestic dwelling. Accordingly, acts of defiance and delinquency, when perpetrated by bondswomen, could be very disruptive. Occasions of women’s defiant behaviour tend to appear in the colonial archive only when (as in Sophie’s case) colonial officials deemed it severe enough to prosecute and record. This behaviour commonly correlated with mistreatment—that is, rebellious behaviour stemming from unhappiness, neglect, or violence at the hands of one’s slaveholder. As this section illustrates, in Mauritius, unfree women and their children were frequently implicated in delinquent or resistant acts.

One prevalent form of resistance to slavery was marronage, or the act of running away. Two types of marronage predominate in the scholarly literature: *petit marronage*, a short-term absence from the slaveholder’s estate or domestic dwelling, and *grand marronage*, in which an

enslaved person fled for a longer period of time or permanently.<sup>46</sup> Both types of marronage were widely documented in Mauritius, yet the archival material does not always offer clear distinctions between the two.<sup>47</sup> A climate of fear surrounding marronage and maroon communities first took hold in Mauritius (then Île de France) in the mid-eighteenth century under French rule. Compared to the nineteenth century, the island was at that time characterized by higher rates of destitution among European landowners, lower economic growth, and greater chattel slave imports; the slave population grew from 2,533 to 15,027 between 1746 and 1767 alone.<sup>48</sup> As there was no concurrent growth in the police force,<sup>49</sup> the free white population grew increasingly fearful of “violent” maroons living in the forested and mountainous areas. Allen estimates that, in the late eighteenth century, about five per cent of the island’s servile population marooned annually; by 1820, the annual incidence of marronage reached from between eleven to thirteen per cent (in a slave population of some 60,000–80,000).<sup>50</sup> In general, women were less likely to maroon than men, as was also true for other slaveholding colonies beyond Mauritius. Cooper notes that only about 16 per cent of runaways in colonial North America and the Caribbean were women.<sup>51</sup> The main reasons for this gender disparity include the fact that flight was very difficult for mothers with children or infants to care for, and that maroon communities themselves were usually male-dominated and sometimes violent environments.

Aggressive acts of subversion, like poisoning, arson, and theft, were also practiced by enslaved peoples across British and French slaveholding societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Maureen Elgersman posits that, in colonial Jamaica, “the extensive

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<sup>46</sup> Gwyn Campbell, ed., *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 53.

<sup>47</sup> Chapter three of this dissertation explains this distinction at more length, and describes how bonded people seeking out the Protector of Slaves’ services in the island were commonly accused of *petit marronage*.

<sup>48</sup> Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, 134.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius* (Port Chester, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 50.

<sup>50</sup> Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen*, 49.

<sup>51</sup> Cooper, *The Hanging of Angelique*, 169.

knowledge that women, especially older women, possessed of herbs and their various properties” was one reason why women were (more often than men) the perpetrators of poisoning their superiors.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Afua Cooper explores the famous case of a young woman named Marie-Joseph Angélique in the eighteenth century, who, following the death of her daughter, was blamed for setting fire to the roof of her slaveholder’s home, causing a blaze that destroyed over 40 buildings in what is today Montréal’s Old Port district. In Mauritius, about one hundred years later, Sophie was also accused of arson and theft while pregnant. Enslaved women could be deliberate and spontaneous in their actions, but crucially, as mothers, they often acted to protect both themselves and their children.

Much scholarship has also shown that women in bondage controlled their births, and performed other, subtle, insubordinate acts. These acts served to both undermine the authority of their owners and as forms of self-defense or self-preservation. Such acts could include insolence and “talking back” to the slaveholding class. In her highly influential book *The Hanging of Angelique*, Cooper notes that the “stereotype” of enslaved women as being “saucy, insolent, and rude to their superiors” must be properly contextualized, as these women experienced “physical hardship, violence, and psychological torture, [and] talking back to their oppressors was one of the ways some defended themselves.”<sup>53</sup> While Cooper argues this in the context of eighteenth-century New France, both police and Protector of Slaves’ reports from early British Mauritius commonly cited “insolence” as the reason for an enslaved woman to be punished. Chapter three of this dissertation explores at more length the manner of the punishments doled out.

Though certain forms of resistance, like marronage, were not as common among women

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<sup>52</sup> Elgersman, *Unyielding Spirits*, 117. See also Herbert S. Klein and Stanley L. Engerman, “Fertility Differentials between Slaves in the United States and the British West Indies: A Note on Lactation Practices and their Possible Implications,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 35 no.2 (April 1978): 357–74.

<sup>53</sup> Cooper, *The Hanging of Angelique*, 172.



and mothers as they were among men, other unique acts of resistance and defiance by enslaved women are readily observable in the archive. Vaughan, who has written extensively about unfree women in eighteenth-century Île de France, notes that child abandonment and abortion were forms of “private resistance.” This manner of resistance is best defined by Elgersman, writing in the context of Jamaica and North America, as “resistance... to the sexual invasion of women’s bodies and their autonomy.” Private resistance could include infanticide, abortion, and “preventative” measures like breast-feeding, which was a commonly-practiced method of contraception that could help women space their births.<sup>54</sup> As well, in 1763, an anonymous observer visiting Mauritius reported a high number of abandoned children.<sup>55</sup> Vaughan notes that babies were commonly left on the doorsteps of the island’s wealthy (often white) inhabitants.<sup>56</sup>

Even prior to having a child, many enslaved women controlled their pregnancies and live births for a multiplicity of reasons, including a desire to spare children from slavery, or the fear of being separated from one’s child.<sup>57</sup> In Jamaica, enslaved women nursed their babies for eighteen to twenty-four months, while some nursed for as long as three years.<sup>58</sup> Unfree women also commonly refrained from intercourse while nursing, which could additionally limit conception.<sup>59</sup> Turner posits that longer lactation periods also served to keep women out of the sugarcane fields for longer spans of time.<sup>60</sup> Conversely, Diana Paton notes that it is important for historians to remember “factors that operate in all societies to influence fertility were present in the context of slavery too,” and that remaining childless was not always a purposeful choice that

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<sup>54</sup> Elgersman, *Unyielding Spirits*, 119.

<sup>55</sup> As quoted in Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, 135.

<sup>56</sup> Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, 131.

<sup>57</sup> Bush, *Slave Women*, 137. This was especially true in the Americas where slaves could be sold across state lines, and at a great distance from their kin.

<sup>58</sup> Turner, *Contested Bodies*, 30.

<sup>59</sup> Bush, *Slave Women*, 126.

<sup>60</sup> Turner, *Contested Bodies*, Chapter 6.

can be read as resistance to slavery.<sup>61</sup> Bonded women derived a great deal of “social and spiritual value” from motherhood, and many desired big families and wider kin groups. While some enslaved women certainly choose to avoid pregnancy, others viewed childrearing as an opportunity “to give their lives meaning and value beyond the daily drudge and brutality of slavery.”<sup>62</sup>

### *The Arrest, Interrogation, and Sentencing of Sophie*

Drawing upon the themes outlined in the chapter thus far, we now return to Sophie, the woman charged with arson and theft, and sentenced to die in 1823–24. The testimony depositions and subsequent documentation related to her sentencing contain important details about how racialized laws and coercion intersected in colonial spaces (like jails) for enslaved women. Moreover, her case demonstrates women’s acts of resistance and deliberate delinquency including instances related to pregnancy and motherhood. As this section shows, maternity, delinquency, and law were entirely interconnected, and some elements of Sophie’s behaviour were likely linked to the fact that she was pregnant.

The formal sequence of events for the early morning of 20 March 1823 is taken from a bundle of archival documents chiefly written by the Attorney (*Procureur*) General of Mauritius, P. Rudelle, in 1823 and 1824. This bundle of materials includes copies of two letters addressed by Rudelle to the British Governor of Mauritius and the British Chief Secretary of Government, dated 6 November 1823 and 27 November 1823, respectively. In these letters, Rudelle recounted

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<sup>61</sup> Diana Paton, “Maternal Struggles and the Politics of Childlessness under Pronatalist Caribbean Slavery,” *Slavery & Abolition* 38, no. 2 (2017): 262.

<sup>62</sup> Turner, *Contested Bodies*, 181.

the arson and theft of March 1823, and he appealed for a change to Sophie's sentencing. According to Rudelle's interpretation of the overlapping French and British laws active in the island, he argued that Sophie could not be sentenced to be executed on the grounds that she was pregnant at the time of her arrest, and based on a medical assessment. Attached to these two letters, as appendices and evidence, are transcriptions for several interview interrogations (spanning from the day of the fire on 20 March 1823 until August of that same year) with Sophie, Bonsergent family members, witnesses, and one medical officer. Indeed, police interrogated both Sophie and other witnesses on more than one occasion in the weeks, and sometimes months, following her arrest. Sophie may have been held in jail for over twelve months. As this section illustrates, a great deal of contradictory evidence was collected during this time in the form of testimonies by Sophie and other witnesses, free and unfree. Rudelle's letters and the interrogation records provide a compelling and unique account of interactions between the French slaveholder class, a pregnant bondswoman and her peers, and British colonial authorities in early nineteenth-century Mauritius.

To begin, Rudelle wrote that on 20 March 1823, in the Bonsergent home in Rivière du Rempart (see Figure 1), Sophie and two other enslaved women, Nina and Juliette, were asleep next to each other in the "salle à manger" (dining room) when the youngest of the Bonsergent children entered the room and awakened Sophie. Sophie then woke the other two women, placed the child in their care, lit a lamp, and climbed up a ladder to the "grenier" (loft, or attic), which stored wine, food, and liquor. There she allegedly gathered and placed several pieces of straw on the loft floor next to where it met the sloped roof, and lit the straw on fire. She descended with her lamp, extinguished it, re-entered the dining room, and took the child back into her own arms under the pretense of going back to sleep. Moments later, Clementine Legars, a visiting family

member, noticed a “glow” coming from the attic above her bedroom, and rushed into the dining room. Because she [Legars] was “presque nue” (practically naked) in only her nightgown, she ordered Sophie to alert the Bonsergents. According to Legars, Sophie refused to do so. By the time the entire household had been alerted and evacuated, the fire had already caused “grands ravages!” (major damages).<sup>63</sup>

In the morning light, Amédée Bonsergent, the owner of the dwelling, told police that Sophie had been tasked with saving “precious pieces” from the home during this fire—presumably money and jewelry. In the process, he alleged that she stole 172 *piastres*.<sup>64</sup> Despite Sophie’s initial attestations that the theft and fire were not her doing, the immediate evidence pointed to Sophie as the main suspect. That same day, police arrested Sophie for arson and theft and took her to the local workhouse and jail where she remained for over a year. In the weeks and months that followed, the police also interrogated many witnesses, sometimes more than once. These witnesses included Jean Gombault, a free man referred to as Sophie’s “lover”; Sophie’s companions from the dining room, Nina and Juliette; three enslaved men from the same estate, named César, Marcelin, and La Rose; Sophie’s slaveholder Amédée Bonsergent; Bonsergent’s visiting sister-in-law Clementine Legars; and several neighbours. These individuals were chiefly questioned about the events on the night of the fire and during the week leading up to the it. The police also asked witnesses more generally about Sophie’s behaviour and about alleged prior thefts on the Bonsergent estate.

Importantly, the Attorney General’s letters to the Governor and the Chief Secretary of Government illustrate the many racialized laws that were in place in Mauritius, and the

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<sup>63</sup> Letter from P. Rudelle to Sir G. Lowry Cole, Governor of Mauritius, 6 November 1823, Port Louis, ff. 155–207, TS 25/2038, NA.

<sup>64</sup> *Piastres* (Spanish dollars) were the unit of currency used in Mauritius during this period. This would have been paper money, not coinage, that Sophie was accused of taking. For more about currencies in Mauritius, see Amenah Jahangeer-Chojoo, “Dollar, Sovereign and Rupee: Money in Mauritius” in *Currencies of the Indian Ocean World*, eds. Steven Serels and Gwyn Campbell (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 185–96.

oppressive nature of the island's colonial spaces, including the jail. Sophie's motivations for allegedly starting the fire were never entirely confirmed, even though the police interrogated her many times. This was likely due to Sophie changing her narrative of events on several occasions between March and August 1823, and the numerous (and sometimes changing) discrepancies in the witness accounts, as well. We must acknowledge, of course, that the transcriptions of Sophie's own words are likely not verbatim, and were mediated by the transcriber to be shorter and clearer. What's more, it is highly likely that some of what Sophie said under interrogation was left out, and that there were also informal interrogations or questioning periods over the many months that she was kept in jail, which have simply not been recorded, or have otherwise been lost. Sophie would have been communicating in French Creole, which likely required a translator, as well, since the archival documents are written in French and English. Imbalances of power related to transcription and translation impacted what was recorded and what was omitted.<sup>65</sup> It is equally important to remember that workhouses and jails were oppressive, uncomfortable, and often violent spaces for people of colour in nineteenth-century colonial settings (and remain so today). The circumstances of being imprisoned and the racial power hierarchies and laws working against Sophie likely influenced the way she responded to questions and told her story.

According to Rudelle, "[Sophie] n'a cessé de se contre dire, un jour elle avoué les faits une autre jour, elle les nie" ("Sophie never stopped contradicting herself, one day attesting to facts that she would deny the next day").<sup>66</sup> For example, Sophie initially stated that earlier in the week, César, a peer on the Bonsergent estate, set fire to a stable and stole money that he hid in

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<sup>65</sup> For more on problems of transcription and translation between archival (imperial) languages and the languages of slavery, see Gunvor Simonsen, *Slave Stories: Law, Representation, and Gender in the Danish West Indies* (Aarhus N, Denmark: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2017).

<sup>66</sup> Rudelle to Cole, 6 November 1823.

the straw roof of a nearby dwelling. When asked by interrogators why she did not report César to Bonsergent at that time, Sophie responded that César had threatened her with bodily harm.<sup>67</sup> Following their initial interrogation of Sophie on 20 and 22 March 1823, the police arrested César, and a large quantity of bank notes were indeed found tucked away in various corners of the estate. When he was asked about this series of events, César accused Sophie of lying, and claimed that he had seen Sophie stealing from a drawer in the Bonsergents' bedroom.<sup>68</sup> Confronted with these details, Sophie then admitted she *had* stolen money earlier that same week, and had given part of it to César to “exchange at the sea shore” for new items of clothing, all of which César denied. The day after Sophie reported this story to the police, she suddenly retracted it, and admitted instead that it was on the night of the house fire that she stole money from the main bedroom.

In the weeks and months following her arrest, Sophie felt fearful of the police and the interrogation process, which may have shaped her responses and her sudden admission(s) of guilt regarding the theft of money. However, another factor must be considered, too: her health and discomfort related to her pregnancy. Sophie was incarcerated prior to her sentencing for five or six months. For part of this period, Sophie was well-advanced in her pregnancy, and then subsequently recovering from childbirth while caring for a newborn infant in prison. On 4 August 1823, nearly five months after her arrest and following childbirth, Sophie confessed that she had not only stolen wallets containing bank notes, but that she had accidentally set fire to the attic while stealing a bottle of liquor. She was sentenced according to this latter confession.<sup>69</sup>

However, witness accounts complicate the story. Laws related to witness credibility and

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<sup>67</sup> ff. 155–207, TS 25/2038, NA.

<sup>68</sup> The interrogators did not ask César why he never reported Sophie to Bonsergent, as they had asked Sophie when she claimed to have witnessed César stealing. This lack of consistency in the interrogation process lowers the credibility of colonial legal procedures involving enslaved peoples.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Sophie, 4 August 1823, Port Louis, ff. 155–207, TS 25/2038, NA.

slave status also influenced the direction taken by police in their investigations of this case. In particular, this is evident in the testimony of Nina, Juliette, and Clementine Legars, who were each interrogated in the week following the fire. Legars, a Mauritian-born French woman and Bonsergent's sister-in-law, claimed that she heard the clanking sound of bottles and footsteps above her bedroom on the night of the fire, but that she thought the sounds were caused by rats. When she noticed a "glow" coming from the ceiling, she ran into the dining room to demand that Sophie alert the Bonsergents, who were asleep in their main bedroom. Legars stated that she was only wearing a nightgown at the time, and therefore could not enter the bedroom herself.<sup>70</sup> When Sophie repeatedly refused to obey orders, Legars claimed she had to physically push Sophie into her brother-in-law and sister's bedroom. Legars also stated that Juliette and Nina remained asleep throughout this entire ordeal.<sup>71</sup>

However, Nina and Juliette both separately attested that they were all very much awake, and that Legars asked Juliette, not Sophie, to alert the household. One theory for the discrepancy in this story is that Legars—for reasons about which we can only speculate—wanted to position Sophie as the perpetrator of the fire. Legars was possibly also aware that the testimony of white residents was considered distinctly superior to that of the enslaved in colonial Mauritius—this was enshrined in the *Code Noir*.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, despite the fact that Nina and Juliette both contradicted Legars, Legars' testimony was accepted in court as the factual narrative.

Further complicating the case were interviews conducted in March and September 1823 with a free man of colour, Jean Gombault, who was Sophie's alleged "lover." The involvement of Gombault raises questions of paternity and protection (of both Sophie and her unborn child).

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<sup>70</sup> One would hope, of course, that in the event of a life or death situation, like that of a house fire, propriety could be pushed aside for a moment so that one's family members would not be burned alive.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Clementine Legars, 26 April 1823. ff. 155–207, TS 25/2038, NA.

<sup>72</sup> *Ordonnance, ou, Code noir: lettres patentes en forme d'Édit concernant les esclaves des Isles de Bourbon et de France, décembre 1723*. Article 23 specifies that slaves can only be witnesses when necessary, and always to the default of "Whites," and they can never act as witnesses for or against their "Masters."

According to Rudelle's letter to the Governor, after the fire, 140 *piastres* of stolen money was found hidden in the straw roof covering Gombault's dwelling. Gombault also allegedly received an additional twenty-four *piastres* from Sophie prior to the fire. Rudelle wrote that "there is no doubt that Gombault was Sophie's accomplice, if not in setting her master's house on fire, then at least in robbing [Bonsergent and his wife]."<sup>73</sup> When Gombault was interrogated by police, he stated that Sophie gave him money, which she claimed she had won or earned through sewing. When asked why he had not realized, given the size of the bank notes, that the money could not possibly have come from those sources, he replied that "il ne sait ni lire ni écrire" ("he did not know how to read nor write").<sup>74</sup> He was later condemned to eight years in chains for his alleged role in the theft.<sup>75</sup>

Rudelle's summary of events and the witness interrogations reflect some confusion about Sophie's relationship with Gombault. Despite an initial statement in which Gombault indicated that he had previously lived with Sophie, he later told police in September 1823 that he had only known her for "a few months before her arrest."<sup>76</sup> If Gombault was the father of the child, it is possible that Sophie was stealing bank notes from the house and giving them to him to hide in order to gather money and resources to sustain herself and her unborn child. For example, when asked what she was planning to do with the stolen money, Sophie responded that "elle se reservait cet argent pour s'habiller" ("she was saving the money to clothe herself").<sup>77</sup> Her "lover" Jean Gombault was trustworthy enough for Sophie to have deposited money with him on more than one occasion, and Sophie may have also given money to César at least twice to buy items,

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<sup>73</sup> Rudelle to Cole, 6 November 1823.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Jean Gombault, 10 September 1823, ff. 155–207, TS 25/2038, NA.

<sup>75</sup> Rudelle to Colonel Barry, 27 November 1823, Port Louis, ff. 155–207, TS 25/2038, NA.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Jean Gombault, 10 September 1823.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Sophie, 4 August 1823, ff. 155–207, TS 25/2038, NA.



including clothes, outside the estate.<sup>78</sup> As Sophie's pregnancy continued, she may have been no longer able to fit into the little clothing provided to her. Sophie may have been committing theft, then, in order to support herself during her pregnancy.

In her testimony to police in the days after the fire, Juliette stated that Sophie and Nina had plotted together to start the fire. She equally claimed that Sophie frequently stole items, including wine, from the attic.<sup>79</sup> Nina told police that *she* was not involved in the fire, but that she, too, saw Sophie climb up to the attic with a lit lamp, and that Sophie had afterwards asked Nina to tell the police she was stealing a bottle of liquor.<sup>80</sup> Sophie may have been in the attic late that night trying to steal food or alcohol, to sell or consume. She may have intentionally set the fire in order to gain access to additional food or money in the household. At the same time, if Sophie *accidentally* started the fire, she may have also impulsively decided to steal money from the Bonsergents' bedroom. However, throughout her interrogation by police, it seems unlikely that Sophie was acting as an intentional "manipulator," consciously and strategically changing her story and giving false information. More likely, with each passing week and month, with no visible support coming from any of her peers or Gombault, and while experiencing the pains of being six or seven months pregnant, she was grasping at straws.<sup>81</sup> She was not supposed to be in the attic that night, and the record of her committing various thefts prior to the fire made it appear more likely than not that she did steal money *during* the fire.

In the course of investigating the events of 20 March 1823, police questioning also brought to light that Sophie and others on the Bonsergent estate did sometimes engage in minor acts of delinquency, like theft, arson, insolence, and *petit marronage*. Vincent and Tamache, two

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<sup>78</sup> Interview with Sophie, 22 March 1823, ff. 155–207, TS 25/2038, NA.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Juliette, 24 March 1823, ff. 155–207, TS 25/2038, NA.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Nina, 24 March 1823, ff. 155–207, TS 25/2038, NA.

<sup>81</sup> Based on the diverse dates of the witness statements, I estimate that Sophie gave birth to her baby in May or June 1823.

men belonging to Bonsergent, were initially mentioned by several witnesses as possible suspects for the arson, and both had a previous history of *petit marronage*.<sup>82</sup> During a police interrogation in March 1823, Sophie affirmed that she had, in the past, overheard Vincent and Tamache both “murmuring” about orders given to them.<sup>83</sup> Nina confirmed to police that Tamache often “murmurait entre ses dents” (“murmured between his teeth”).<sup>84</sup> Two other bonded men belonging to Bonsergent, Marcelin and La Rose, also claimed that Tamache frequently marooned “for nothing” (that is, for minor irritants).<sup>85</sup>

Several witnesses also revealed that a small stable fire had occurred during the same week as the house fire. The police interrogators seized upon this event and asked many witnesses about it, likely hoping this would lead them to whomever set the house ablaze. However, the responses they received were contradictory. Bonsergent told the authorities that the stable fire was accidental and of little consequence. By contrast, many of his enslaved workers, including Sophie, claimed that it was a case of arson and that César was the person responsible. Sophie told police that on the morning of the small stable fire, she saw César exit the main house and head towards the stable with an enflamed iron brand in his hand, implying that he had set the fire using the brand.<sup>86</sup> Thus, acts of defiance and delinquency—including theft, insolence, and arson—may have been occurring on Bonsergent’s estate with some regularity prior to 20 March 1823, though Bonsergent clearly did not view every incident as critical enough to involve the police. I point to these smaller acts to highlight that the theft and arson Sophie allegedly committed were commensurate with the volatile and violent nature of slaveholding in colonial Mauritius.

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<sup>82</sup> Rudelle to Barry, 27 November 1823.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Sophie, 20 March 1823.

<sup>84</sup> Murmuring “under his breathe” would be a more contemporary translation of this phrase. Interview with Nina, 20 March 1823, ff. 155–207, TS 25/2038, NA.

<sup>85</sup> Interviews with Marcelin and La Rose, 20 March 1823, ff. 155–207, TS 25/2038, NA.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Sophie, 22 March 1823.

Even though Sophie's motivation for committing theft may have been to collect resources for herself and her unborn child, Sophie's pregnancy was not openly acknowledged by the police during her interrogation and imprisonment. In fact, it is worth noting just *how little* Sophie's pregnancy was discussed by police. During the interrogation of Sophie and other witnesses in the months following her arrest, there is no evidence that authorities considered Sophie's actions to be related to her pregnancy, and in the entirety of the interrogation transcripts, her pregnancy was mentioned on only two occasions. The first was on 11 April 1823, when Juliette was asked by police if Sophie regularly went up to the attic; Juliette replied that, to her knowledge, Sophie had not climbed up to the attic since becoming pregnant.<sup>87</sup> Nearly four months later in August 1823, with Sophie still maintaining that she went into the attic to steal a bottle of liquor, the interrogators asked how often she usually drank alcohol. She replied "jamais" ("never"). When asked why she wanted a drink that night, she answered "c'est une envie de femme grosse" ("it is a pregnant woman's desire").<sup>88</sup> In neither of these two instances did the interrogators seem to respond to the fact that Sophie was pregnant, nor ask further questions about it, and thereafter, the interview records and legal notes remain silent on the subject. Sophie's physical condition—as a pregnant woman and then new mother—was not deemed worthy of mention by Bonsergent or the police and colonial interrogators. As illustrated in prior sections of this chapter, this fits into wider patterns of disinterest in slave maternity and motherhood by colonial authorities and enslavers in Mauritius.

In addition to depicting acts of resistance, Sophie's case also reflects nuances in law that complicated British governance in Mauritius. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Attorney General Rudelle, a member of the French-Mauritian elite, was the only individual to

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Juliette, 11 April 1823, ff. 155–207, TS 25/2038, NA.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Sophie, 4 August 1823.

raise doubts about the validity of Sophie's final sentencing. He did so on the basis that according to French laws, Sophie's status as a pregnant woman—and later, a new mother—disqualified her from being executed. Rudelle also drew attention to the underlying tension between competing French and English legal authority on the island. In his letter to the British governor in November 1823, Rudelle questioned the overlap between French and English slave laws in Mauritius, which were a complex mix of new British ordinances and much older French laws, like the *Code Noir*. French-Mauritian inhabitants were permitted to uphold their laws, including those related to slaveholding, following Britain's annexation of Mauritius in 1810. However, new laws were continually introduced by British colonial authorities throughout the 1820s to nuance and change existing French legal codes. As chapters two and three of this dissertation reveal, tensions between French and British legal authority in the island affected British colonial governance across several sectors.

Moreover, the *Code Noir* and similar laws restricting the mobility and behaviour of slaves also harshly impacted pregnant women and mothers with children. For example, if an enslaved woman had a child, it was illegal for her to try and care for her baby in any way that went beyond what was permitted by the slaveholder. If the slaveholder did not provide her with enough food, clothing, or adequate shelter, it was illegal, according to the *Code Noir*, for her to privately seek additional resources to feed or care for herself and her child.<sup>89</sup> That said, survival instincts often induced mothers to break the law, and through theft and other illegal means, they sought to acquire the necessary resources to provide, for example, adequate clothing for

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<sup>89</sup> Art. XIV of the *Code Noir* (1723) states that an enslaved person may not sell any goods without the express permission of their masters (and thus may not accumulate money without a master's permission). Art. XVI likewise states that inhabitants have the right to confiscate goods from an enslaved person who does not hold a "note" or bill of ownership from their master. Art. XXI states even more succinctly that an enslaved person cannot own anything that is not also their master's property, and cannot pass along goods or money to their children or parents. These laws, taken together, limited an enslaved person's ability to seek out or possess additional resources apart from what was strictly permitted by their respective slaveholder.

themselves and their infants. Sophie, no doubt in a position where her body was changing rapidly, initially stated that she stole the money to buy clothing, since new clothing was normally only provided once per year. For an enslaved person, the act of stealing money was undoubtedly stressful, given the severe consequences (such as physical punishment or outright death) should they be caught. This is also an example of how the harshness of slaveholding and the strict regulations of the *Code Noir* caused stress, trauma, and other forms of psychological injury to mothers.

Attorney General Rudelle, it seems, was principally concerned with the fact that a pregnant woman—the property of a Frenchman—had been sentenced to death under English laws, rather than French legal codes. In his letter to the Governor, Rudelle cited numerous laws that were in effect in Île de France (Mauritius) when it was under French rule prior to 1810, and which continued to be enforced following the island’s conquest by the British.<sup>90</sup> The Criminal Ordinance of 1670, for example, which was a criminal statute of procedure implemented throughout the French empire, included a stipulation that a pregnant woman sentenced to death could not be executed until after childbirth.<sup>91</sup> Rudelle also recalled pieces of the French penal code that, as he put it, were “plus humaine” (“more humane”), to demonstrate that there was legal precedent for staying the execution of pregnant women. The *Code Penal* stated that “no woman who has been convicted of a crime carrying the death penalty may be [executed] unless it has been verified in the ordinary way that she is not pregnant.”<sup>92</sup> Rudelle also referred to two cases in 1806 and 1807 in which two pregnant women, convicted of capital crimes, had their

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<sup>90</sup> The *Code Noir* (1723) itself was nearly 100 years old when Sophie was prosecuted.

<sup>91</sup> *Criminal Ordinance of 1670*, Titre 25 “Des Sentences, Jugemens & Arrêts,” Article 23. Several other articles pertain to specific conditions for enslaved women, as well.

<sup>92</sup> Translated by author. *Code Penal*, loi 23 Germinal, An 3. In J.B. Duvergier, *Des lois, décrets, ordonnances, réglemens, et avis du conseil-d’État, depuis 1788 jusques et y compris 1824* (Paris: A. Guyot et Scribe, 1825), 95.

death sentences rescinded when it was discovered that they were both pregnant.<sup>93</sup>

The Attorney General seemed quite intent on proving that a pregnant woman should answer to different criminal penalties than those faced by a non-pregnant woman in colonial Mauritius. He also posed an important question in his correspondence to the Governor: if Sophie intended to secretly set fire to the attic in the middle of the night, why did she wake Nina and Juliette beforehand, to give them Bonsergent's child to care for? Would Sophie not have realized that these two women would then be witnesses to the crime? Would that not be an act of "veritable demence" ("true madness")?<sup>94</sup> On the other hand, Sophie may have planned to commit theft or arson in the attic, and did not want the small child—who unexpectedly appeared in the dining room late that night—to follow her or create additional noise.

Rudelle's suggestion that Sophie acted out of "madness" was also somewhat strategic. After raising this, he then posed another question to the Governor: was it possible that Sophie's state of pregnancy inclined her to commit these crimes? In making this suggestion, Rudelle was not referring to the idea that Sophie may have committed theft to secure resources for herself and her unborn child. Instead, he was reaching into the medical world to seek out a biological reason for a woman to act "oddly" while pregnant. He even suggested that, since Sophie had never really given Bonsergent any cause for suspicion prior to the fire, her criminal behaviour *must* have been linked to her pregnancy.<sup>95</sup>

To further make his case to the British Governor that Sophie was wrongly tried, Rudelle engaged a lawyer specializing in medicine, named Alberti, as an expert witness to re-examine the

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<sup>93</sup> The very complex laws—that time does not allow me to fully explore in one dissertation —also stipulated at which point in the proceedings a woman must be "checked" for pregnancy (that is, before or after the interrogation), and this could affect whether a woman could be put on trial or interrogated in the first place.

<sup>94</sup> Rudelle to Cole, 6 November 1823.

<sup>95</sup> Rudelle to Cole, 6 November 1823.

case. This took place sometime between 18 September and 6 November 1823.<sup>96</sup> Alberti was asked to explore the following question: Can the state of pregnancy produce, in certain women, an irresistible desire to commit “*differens excès*” (excesses of judgement, or abnormal judgement) and notably, the crime in question?<sup>97</sup> According to Rudelle, Alberti confirmed that pregnancy was likely to “*déranger l’imagination des femmes et depraver leur volonté*” (“to derange the female mind and deprive them of free will”)<sup>98</sup> and that this temperament was particularly common in irritable and melancholic women whose blood vessels were uncommonly small. Drinking little and eating a lot of “cold foods” were also considered to be aggravating factors. Through this consultation with Alberti, Rudelle linked pregnancy with abnormal behavioural and personality traits in women.

Rudelle’s conclusion, based on Alberti’s assessment, was in line with current medical knowledge at the time. According to Clare Hanson, it was during the 1820s and 1830s that pregnancy was first associated with “extreme despondency and even mental derangement,” primarily in popular obstetric texts.<sup>99</sup> The idea that mental instability—and later, hysteria—was linked to ovulation and pregnancy also burgeoned in early nineteenth-century Britain. Numerous English and Scottish authors, including social reformers Francis Place (1771–1854) and Robert Dale Owen (1801–77), and physician George Man Burrows (1771–1846), wrote extensively about female physiology, population, sexual “desire,” and the psychology of pregnancy.<sup>100</sup> Alberti’s assessment of Sophie’s behaviour demonstrates that medical science related to

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<sup>96</sup> We are not given Alberti’s full name, nor any biographical information about him.

<sup>97</sup> Rudelle to Cole, 6 November 1823.

<sup>98</sup> Rudelle to Cole, 6 November 1823.

<sup>99</sup> Clare Hanson, *A Cultural History of Pregnancy: Pregnancy, Medicine and Culture, 1750-2000* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 61.

<sup>100</sup> For example, see Francis Place, *Illustrations and Proofs of the Principles of Population* (1822); Robert Dale Owen, *Moral Physiology; or, A Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question* (1830); and George Man Burrows, *An Inquiry into certain Errors relative to Insanity and their Consequences, Physical, Moral, and Civil* (1820).

women's mental health and pregnancy was clearly drawing from beliefs that pregnancy was linked to a lack of control and unpredictability. Emphasis on the need for pregnant women to control their emotions—and their emotionally-driven behavior—was evidently strong. This would have only contributed to slaveholders' ignorance of the biological realities of pregnancy and maternity.

This entanglement of imperial law, pregnancy, and slavery in Mauritius is illustrated best in the concluding document of Sophie's case, which was appended to Rudelle's letters and witness testimonies in the archive. In November 1823, Rudelle's appeals to the Governor of Mauritius and the Chief Secretary of Government were sent onwards to the King's Advocate, and the Attorney and Solicitor General in London, who then enlisted three legal experts to assess how the laws should be interpreted in Sophie's sentencing. Three British lawyers working in London, Mr. Robinson, Mr. Copley, and Mr. Wetherell, for whom no biographical details are available, were assigned to help the British colonial courts interpret the law. The lawyers explicitly wrote that while the French penal code did state that a pregnant woman could not be executed, certain of these laws had never been "officially" enforced in British Mauritius, and as such, could not be applied to the case. Thus, they concluded that Sophie's execution sentence, based on the laws at play in Mauritius during the year of her trial (1823), was correct and fair. Even though Sophie had a newborn infant, and the case was taken up by the Attorney General and three London lawyers, Sophie's pregnancy and motherhood were deemed, legally, non-issues.

However, these conclusive findings by Robinson, Copley, and Wetherell were dated 28 August 1824, almost one year *after* the investigation and Sophie's sentencing in Mauritius. By this point, Sophie's child would have been well over one year old. What happened to Sophie?



Because of the appeals submitted by Rudelle to the Governor and the Chief Secretary of Government, Sophie had been kept alive for an additional year during which time she was held in jail with her newborn baby, likely fearful that her death sentence would be carried out at any time. Only two other scholars (to my knowledge) have researched Sophie, both of whom are historians of Indian Ocean penal colonies and convict transportation systems. Clare Anderson, in her book *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean world*, writes that, following Rudelle's appeal, in 1824 Sophie became one of only four individuals ever transported, as convicts, from Mauritius to New South Wales (present-day southeastern Australia). Using archival material from the region, Anderson pieces together a very brief account of Sophie's case, though her narrative differs somewhat from that told in the documents held in London.<sup>101</sup> Eilin Hordvik also uses archival material from Australia to show that Sophie's sentence was commuted to transportation for life, and that she was sent by ship to Sydney on 30 June 1825, with her son, Jean.<sup>102</sup> Bonsergent was reimbursed for the loss of both Sophie and her son, his enslaved property. Upon arrival in New South Wales, Sophie was assigned as a servant to a police superintendent, Francis Rossi, and three years later she married a man named John Henry, a former enslaved man and convict from Dutch Guiana.<sup>103</sup> They had a daughter in June 1833, named Sophia.

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<sup>101</sup> Anderson's account states that Sophie burned down her mistress' barn, and that her mistress' daughter, Juliette, witnessed Sophie doing so. I believe there is a slight problem of translation occurring here. "Grenier" can be translated from French to "granary" or "hay loft," for example, though in the context of Sophie's case, "grenier" is used to refer to the loft or attic space located on the top-most floor of the home, which is where Sophie allegedly started a fire in the night. In addition, I saw no mention of her mistress' daughter in the documents I used, though there was an enslaved woman named Juliette, who was sleeping in the same quarters as Sophie, and who gave witness testimony to this effect. Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean world, 1790–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 76–8.

<sup>102</sup> Eilin Hordvik, "Exotic Cargo: Convict Women Shipped from Mauritius," in eds. Lucy Frost and Colette McAlpine, *From the Edges of Empire: Convict Women from Beyond the British Isles* (Tasmania: Convict Women's Press, 2015), 42.

<sup>103</sup> Hordvik, "Exotic Cargo," 44.

## *Conclusion*

The trial, imprisonment, and sentencing of Sophie highlights the intersections of slave motherhood, violence, and injury perpetrated against enslaved and pregnant women, and the responses of these women, sometimes in the form of resistant behaviour. Moreover, it illustrates how law and medicine, to a degree, perpetuated a neglect of pregnancy, reproductive health, and the maternal needs of bonded women. Moving into the late 1820s, with the interventions of the Commission of Eastern Enquiry and the introduction of slavery amelioration laws, the archival records hint that, while British-led measures aimed at improving the lives of enslaved labourers were increasing in number, many were ineffective. New colonial laws simply opened new avenues for enslaved women to be neglected or punished, thus creating new spaces for acts of resistance and defiance—by women *and* men. In this period, attitudes towards pregnancy and motherhood under slavery remained both physically and psychologically damaging to enslaved women, yet, as Sophie's case reveals, women could and did exercise strength, agency, and defiance within this dehumanizing regime.

## Chapter 2

### **“I have never belonged to anyone!”:**

### **The Commission of Eastern Enquiry and Contested Freedom, 1820–1828**

Marie Saladin was fifteen years old when she met her partner, twenty-year-old Etienne Florimond, a free man of colour, in 1794.<sup>1</sup> The pair lived together unmarried in their home in Port Louis, Mauritius, for thirty-two years, where they had thirteen children and seven grandchildren.<sup>2</sup> In 1826, Marie and Etienne approached the Commission of Eastern Enquiry (CEE), a body of British representatives newly arrived to Mauritius, claiming that Marie and their children were being illegally registered as slaves by members of Marie’s former adoptive family. Marie spent nearly 20 years battling with the family, their attorneys, and the colonial courts, as she tried to legally secure freedom for herself and her children.

This chapter will explore freedom and conditions of freedom for the enslaved—with an emphasis on women—in British Mauritius (c. 1820–28), just prior to the introduction of colonial slavery amelioration policies (the subject of chapter three). I will address the manumission laws active during the 1820s, and the various groups that interacted with these laws, most notably free people of colour (*gens de couleur*), but also recaptive Africans and “government slaves,” and women like Marie Saladin who seemed to occupy a grey area between free and unfree. An exploration of government slavery and recaptivity is especially valuable, as this population of

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<sup>1</sup> A brief note on naming practices: the enslaved frequently had their names changed by enslavers. While Marie did not consider herself to be enslaved to either of the families she lived with as a child, her names were still chosen for her by the matriarchs of each family. In this case, Marie’s first “benefactress” named her “Marie,” while the second called her “Marion” (which was considered a derivative of Marie). She is referred to as “Marie” throughout the archival documentation, and she refers to herself as such frequently, which is why I have chosen to use the name Marie Saladin throughout this chapter, rather than Marion. She also refers to herself as Marie Florimond in some correspondence.

<sup>2</sup> “Statement and Documents relative to the Case of ‘Marie Saladin,’ alias Marion, a foundling for 47 years, was declared to be a slave by M. Lacroix, Procureur of Madame Barillon, addressed to the Messieurs les Commissaires d’Enquêtes,” 10 November 1826, Port Louis, Appendix A, Colonial Office (CO), f. 415/4, National Archives, Kew (hereafter NA).

unfree labourers has not been studied extensively in the slavery historiography for Mauritius and the western Indian Ocean world. The colonial government maintained this group in a state of bondage well into the 1830s, though by 1839, far fewer liberated Africans (recaptives) were being seized from slaving vessels than in the 1810s and 1820s. Freedom was difficult for recaptives to achieve, as it was for chattel slaves in the island.

These diverse groups also represent the different forms of bondage practiced in Mauritius, which the CEE was sent to investigate. Active on the island from 1826 to 1828, the CEE heard and recorded dozens of cases of men and women who claimed to be, or to have been, illegally enslaved in Mauritius. The head commissioners, William Colebrooke and William Blair, compiled a report inquiring into the illegal, though still active, slave trade occurring in Mauritius; similar inquiries were held in the Cape Colony and Ceylon. The commission acted as a form of data collection for the Colonial Office in London, and was mandated with investigating persistent cases of slavery and unfree labour in the western Indian Ocean. The commissioners sought methods to improve (“ameliorate”) slavery for those who were still enslaved in Mauritius, and the appendices to their two-year investigation are rich with documentation narrating the struggles of the enslaved. Importantly, the appendices also reflect precarious conditions of freedom experienced by women and girls.

By focusing on accounts pulled from these appendices, this chapter will amplify the narratives of enslaved (and precariously free) women, of which there is a dearth in the historiography of slavery in Indian Ocean Africa, and who were, for the most part, excluded from the body of the commissioners’ widely-distributed final report. As historian Stephanie Smallwood argues, “the archive is seeking to ignore, marginalize and disavow,” and when researching the history of the enslaved, the details of their lives are often “displaced to the

perimeter space outside the lines of the ledger; or subordinated as addenda to the main text of the report.”<sup>3</sup> To counter such imbalances, this chapter will reflect upon the contents of the archived addenda to the major CEE reports in order to highlight women’s narratives. Cases like that of Marie Saladin will be brought to the fore, to explore how enslaved peoples interacted with colonial authorities, like the CEE, as they pursued freedom.

### ***Part One: Conditions of Freedom and Law***

The idea of freedom in early nineteenth-century British Mauritius was quite complex, particularly for people of colour. Manumission laws were constantly in flux, and many individuals of African and South Asian descent, including those born in Mauritius, often faced the possibility of bondage and sometimes re-enslavement. Marie Saladin, for example, lived as a free woman for most of her early life—yet, she discovered at the age of thirty-three that she was legally enslaved to her French adoptive family. Some groups, like recaptive Africans and government slaves (discussed in Part Two below), also held ambiguous legal statuses somewhere between free and unfree.

How was freedom defined in the context of early nineteenth-century British Mauritius? Sue Peabody, in her work on slavery in Île Bourbon (Réunion) in the same period, posits that states or conditions of freedom and bondage frequently changed over time in slaveholding

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<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Smallwood, “The Politics of the Archive and History’s Accountability to the Enslaved,” *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (2016): 125.

societies.<sup>4</sup> This was certainly true in Mauritius. One could still enter or re-enter a state of slavery or bondage in Mauritius after 1807, despite the parliamentary ban on slave-trading. Being manumitted or otherwise “freed” from slavery did not always grant a former enslaved person freedom of mobility or choice of employment. For some, freedom meant the ability to maintain kinship ties, belong to a family, and prepare “a legacy for generations to come.”<sup>5</sup> Marie Saladin sought freedom from slavery for herself, her children, and her grandchildren, and she wanted this freedom to be legally acknowledged and recorded by colonial courts. Marie wished to choose her home, her husband, and her means of employment, and she desired the freedom to earn, save, and spend money. These are the basic freedoms that many—though certainly not all—bondspeople in Mauritius strove for.

Free people of colour living in Mauritius in the first half of the nineteenth century also experienced a somewhat contested condition of freedom. This population was composed of former slaves, and other free, Mauritian-born (Creole) people of non-European descent. Those who were formerly enslaved had been either manumitted by their enslavers, purchased their own freedom (this was largely only possible for men who engaged in skilled labour), or had been redeemed by another person—commonly a spouse or family member. Some attained manumission through marriage. However, free people of colour still experienced a great deal of discrimination despite being legally free. This included prejudicial, race-based colonial laws that limited interracial marriage and access to public education, for example. Free people of colour represented a racialized social group that was, as Richard Allen argues, “neither slave nor free.”<sup>6</sup> Allen also addresses how white elites on the island controlled manumission and laws related to

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<sup>4</sup> Sue Peabody, *Madeleine's Children: Family, Freedom, Secrets, and Lies in France's Indian Ocean Colonies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Peabody, *Madeleine's Children*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Labourers in Colonial Mauritius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 80.

socio-economic and class distinctions in order to “relegate local free persons of color to the margins of colonial life.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Orlando Patterson argues that although free people of colour eventually attained full citizenship in many former British colonies, they nonetheless continued to suffer “the stigma of slave and partial black ancestry.”<sup>8</sup>

What’s more, manumission (or “affranchisement”) laws were complex, constantly changing, and sometimes willfully ignored. Vijaya Teelock argues that Mauritian slaveholders and their lawyers campaigned widely in the 1820s for the implementation of stricter laws in order to render manumission more difficult.<sup>9</sup> Given the prosperous sugar industry in Mauritius in this period—Mauritian sugar exports increased by 2,500 per cent between 1812 and 1824 alone—land owners (most of whom were of French descent) were less keen to allow manumission and potentially lose labourers.<sup>10</sup> British authorities did not successfully institute more lenient manumission laws until 1829 when, adopting one of the recommendations of the CEE, they issued *Ordinance no. 43* establishing a Protector of Slaves to the island (as discussed at length in chapter three of this dissertation).<sup>11</sup> This ordinance was the first of a number of measures promoting the amelioration of the slave condition in Mauritius.

The CEE observed that attaining freedom from bondage through manumission was neither easy nor common before 1829. Between 1815 and 1826, an average of eighty-four

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<sup>7</sup> Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen*, 80. In the 1820s, this population did push back against local colonial authorities for the termination of certain discriminatory laws, including the illegality of mixed-race marriages (miscegenation laws), and for access to the Royal College of Mauritius for their children.

<sup>8</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: a comparative study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 257.

<sup>9</sup> Vijaya Teelock, *Bitter Sugar: Sugar and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Mauritius* (Moka, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1998), 220.

<sup>10</sup> Slave-trading was also illegal by this time, though there was illicit slave trafficking still occurring to Mauritius from the East African coast and Madagascar. However, the slave population was declining in the 1820s, at the same time as the sugar economy was booming. This meant that planters were not eager to part with their bonded workers.

<sup>11</sup> For the full text of *Ordinance no. 43* and correspondence related to it, see “Papers presented to Parliament by His Majesty’s command, in explanation of the measures adopted by His Majesty’s government, for the melioration of the condition of the slave population in His Majesty’s possessions in the West Indies, on the continent of South America, and at the Mauritius,” 1830, Parliamentary Papers Online (hereafter PP) (676), 121–206.

manumissions annually occurred in Mauritius, most commonly affecting women under fifty-one years of age, with 1,005 manumissions total in this period. Satyendra Peerthum confirms the sharp decline in manumissions, particularly between 1823 and 1825. By 1826, the year the CEE arrived in Mauritius, the slave population would have numbered between 70,000 and 80,000 individuals, of which only 444 had been successfully emancipated, 245 through marriage and 199 by bequest (through a slaveholders' will upon her/his death).<sup>12</sup> Peerthum also offers compelling gendered data: of the 433 slaves manumitted between 1821 and 1826, sixty-six per cent were female, and so were just over fifty per cent of those manumitted between 1829 and 1830.<sup>13</sup>

Many obstacles stood in the way of bondspeople purchasing their freedom, as illustrated in the accounts collected by the CEE. Slaveholders often reneged on verbal agreements to manumit, manumission clauses in wills were misinterpreted or disregarded, and certificates of birth and sale—needed to confirm one's status as either enslaved or free—and certificates of manumission were frequently falsified, lost, and destroyed. Slaveholders infrequently or falsely reported their enslaved property in official censuses. As Peabody emphasizes in the context of Île Bourbon, when a person was manumitted, slaveholders sometimes falsely listed him or her as a slave in the official censuses held a few years later. On very rare occasions, enslaved persons were legally manumitted but never informed of it.<sup>14</sup> The complexities of manumission, then, contributed to the precarious nature of freedom for the enslaved and free people of colour.

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<sup>12</sup> Teelock, *Bitter Sugar*, 99.

<sup>13</sup> Satyendra Peerthum, "'Fit for Freedom': Manumission and Freedom in Early British Mauritius, 1811-1839," in eds. Abdul Sheriff, Vijaya Teelock and Saada Omar Wahab, *Transition from Slavery in Zanzibar and Mauritius: A Comparative History* (Dakar: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, 2016), 84.

<sup>14</sup> Peabody, *Madeleine's Children*, Chapter 4 (the case of Madeleine, the title figure).



In the decade following the 1807 prohibition of slave-trading in the British empire, the British government began to question more closely its policies and rules of law related to slavery.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, anti-slavery campaigners began to shift their focus away from the Atlantic world towards enslavement practices in Britain's colonies in the Indian Ocean world. This formed the context for the establishment of the Commission of Eastern Enquiry into slavery, which visited the Cape Colony, Mauritius, and Ceylon.<sup>16</sup>

Of particular importance to this switch in geographical emphasis was anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Buxton (1786–1845). On 9 May 1826, Buxton addressed the House of Commons in London on the subject of the slave trade in Mauritius. Buxton stated that “a regular, systematic, and unceasing import of slaves” was occurring in the island, and to this effect he produced testimonials from several military, naval, and civil officers who had served there. Some of these provided eye-witness accounts of vessels openly sailing into the Port Louis harbour with enslaved persons on board, smaller vessels landing in remote forested inlets in La Morne (a densely-forested area in the southwest part of the island), and ship captains disembarking unfree men and women onto tiny boats that would speed away just as Custom's officials boarded their ships for inspection. Further, Buxton reported that Mauritius had a thriving slave trade with other locations in the western Indian Ocean, included Madagascar, the Seychelles, and the east coast of

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<sup>15</sup> For more on the history of abolition in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds, see Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, and Keith McClelland, eds., *Emancipation and the Remaking of the British Imperial World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Gwyn Campbell, ed., *Abolition and its Aftermath in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2005); Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Sandra Greene, *Slave Owners of West Africa: Decision Making in the Age of Abolition* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> I choose to use the spelling “enquiry” rather than “inquiry,” as “enquiry” is the spelling used on the cover page of the CEE's final report.

Africa (Mozambique and Zanzibar, in particular). His address also implied that at least three British governors of Mauritius, and many other colonial officials, were well aware of, and in some instances profiting directly from, this illicit slave trade.<sup>17</sup> Buxton proved hugely influential in pressuring the imperial government to act on these rumours.

Many imperial government inquiries were set up in a “quest to reshape Britain’s empire,” as Zoe Laidlaw posits, through humanitarianism and attempts to improve the lives of indigenous and bonded peoples.<sup>18</sup> Between 1818 and 1826, sixteen commissions of inquiry were launched by the British government, including six to colonies abroad (like Mauritius), and three to Ireland.<sup>19</sup> These commissions were lengthy and expensive, and employed many personnel, including individuals with military experience, backgrounds in law, and an administrative staff composed of clerks and translators. Laidlaw argues that humanitarian and moral sentiment were driving factors behind the rise of the government inquiries and commissions that sprung up in the 1820s and 1830s to investigate “the emancipation of slaves, [convict] transportation to Australia, [and] indigenous-settler relations.”<sup>20</sup> Laidlaw also contends that these commissions served to raise “parliamentary and public awareness of imperial atrocities” while, importantly, “emphasizing *reform rather than revolution* as a means of redressing such wrongs [emphasis added].”<sup>21</sup> For the Commission of Eastern Enquiry, one goal was to develop reforms to render

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Fowell Buxton, “Slave Trading, and the State of the Slaves at the Mauritius,” Hansard, 9 May 1826, vol 15, cc1014-51.

<sup>18</sup> Zoë Laidlaw, “Investigating Empire: Humanitarians, Reform and the Commission of Eastern Inquiry,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 5 (2012): 749. I will not delve into the relationship between humanitarianism and anti-slavery work, as many scholars have sufficiently explored this topic already, including Margaret Abruzzo, *Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty, and the Rise of Humanitarianism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Clare Midgley, *Feminism and Empire: Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790-1865* (London: Routledge, 2007); Amalia Ribi Forclaz, *Humanitarian Imperialism: the Politics of Anti-Slavery Activism, 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Kevin Grant, “The British Empire, International Government, and Human Rights,” *History Compass* 11, no. 8 (2013): 573–83; and Partha Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Laidlaw, “Investigating Empire,” 751.

<sup>20</sup> Laidlaw, “Investigating Empire,” 751.

<sup>21</sup> Laidlaw, “Investigating Empire,” 749.

the institution of slavery less physically harsh for the enslaved. Laidlaw posits that the creation of the CEE was one in a long list of responses to the claims of anti-slavery activists, like Buxton. For the CEE, investigating slavery was a central mandate, hence the commission's rich report and appendices related to the slave trade in Mauritius.<sup>22</sup>

### *The Commission of Eastern Enquiry in Mauritius*

Composed of John Bigge, William Colebrooke, and William Blair, the CEE and their administrative staff were appointed and dispatched to the western Indian Ocean in 1822 to investigate colonial governance in the Cape Colony, Mauritius, and Ceylon. The commissioners arrived in the Cape Colony in 1823, travelled to Mauritius in 1826, and then to Ceylon in 1829. All activities were complete by 1833 when the Commission issued its final recommendations in a series of reports.

In May 1826, Lord Henry Bathurst, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, issued a set of instructions to the CEE commissioners.<sup>23</sup> They were told to look into “the general administration of government, and the immediate control exercised by the Governor himself” in all three colonies, as well as “local institutions, establishments, and regulations, civil and military, and more especially those of a judicial and financial character.”<sup>24</sup> For Mauritius, the

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<sup>22</sup> Laidlaw, “Investigating Empire,” 754.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Bathurst, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, to Commissioners John Thomas Bigge and William M.G. Colebrooke, “No. 1: Copy of the Instructions given to the Commissioners of Enquiry proceeding to the Cape of Good Hope, Mauritius, and Ceylon,” 18 January 1823, in “Copies of the Instructions Originally given by the Right Honourable the Secretary for the Colonies, for the guidance of the Commissioners sent to the Cape of Good Hope, to the West Indies, to Sierra Leone, to enquire into the situation of those Colonies, also Copies of the any Supplementary Instructions sent to the Commissioners,” 2 May 1826, PP (332).

<sup>24</sup> Bathurst to Bigge and Colebrooke, 18 January 1823.

commissioners were told to hold “special inquiry” into the conduct of both the Chief Judge and Attorney General. Chapter three of this dissertation investigates in more detail the animosity between the French inhabitants of Mauritius, who were the principle slaveholders and political elites prior to 1810, and the new British colonial authorities, many of whom were interested in abolishing slavery. Some of the French-Mauritian elite who retained their government offices and roles into the 1820s and 1830s were very antagonistic towards British officials. It seems that some of the questionable actions and decisions of these elite Frenchmen had been made known to officials in London, and were therefore made a targeted component of the CEE’s investigation.

Lord Bathurst also emphasized that the commission must maintain the status quo, rather than act as a body with the power to effect legal change or directly help those in need. He wrote,

with respect to complaints which individuals may be disposed to refer to you, against any established authorities in the respective colonies, you will understand, that you are not authorized to enter into an examination of such complaints, unless you receive specific instructions to that effect from this department, or unless in very special cases which cannot be anticipated.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, dozens of unfree people and other inhabitants of Mauritius registered complaints with the CEE related to cases of illegal slaveholding and manumission, which the complainants felt were not being adequately handled by local authorities, including judges, the attorney general, and the governor. Bathurst’s particular instructions to investigate “the causes of embarrassment, as produced from the circumstances and commercial relations of the colonies” were likely a direct reference to the on-going illicit slave trade in British Indian Ocean colonies.

To this end, the CEE was directly tasked with gathering information about the enslaved,

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<sup>25</sup> Bathurst to Bigge and Colebrooke, 18 January 1823.

which included “government slaves,” “government apprentices,” “Prize Negroes,” and “liberated Africans.” As discussed in Part Two of this chapter, many government-owned labourers remained in a state of bondage with no freedom of mobility or choice of work, though they did receive housing, clothing, and (low) wages paid by the British colonial government. Lord Bathurst’s instructions highlighted that the CEE must inquire into the state of the enslaved population, “and the means of relieving them, [and] the condition of government slaves, their present employment, and the means of their instruction and future emancipation.”<sup>26</sup>

How did the commissioners and their clerks conduct their work? The commission was largely an exercise in data collection: the commissioners compiled thousands of records that were later appended to their final reports and sent to England, where they are still stored. While residing in Mauritius, the commissioners reviewed ongoing cases and trials, and collected copies of police record books, custom house records, and correspondence between men in positions of power. While the clerks copied physical documents by hand, they also accepted petitions and oral statements made by inhabitants, including free persons of colour and the enslaved (though this usually took place through a third party, who was white). It is this latter group that produced the most compelling and relevant information for this chapter’s discussion of the inability for nominally liberated individuals to attain freedom, and related injustices felt by the enslaved.

Unfortunately, there is little information available related to the commissioners’ stay on the island from the perspective of Mauritian inhabitants. In the years following the CEE’s departure from Mauritius, however, residents and colonial officials sometimes did complain about certain recommendations made by them. For example, the commissioners inquired into the state of the Royal College in Port Louis, and recommended that the college take on boarders. In a letter from 1836, Governor William Nicolay expressed concerns and doubts about this

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<sup>26</sup> Bathurst to Bigge and Colebrooke, 18 January 1823.

recommendation to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London.<sup>27</sup> What's more, Blair and Colebrooke remarked that, during their stay in the island, they felt "unpopular with the inhabitants" of Mauritius, and that a "strong repugnance" prevailed against their investigation into the slave trade.<sup>28</sup> They also reported that due to a recent reduction of British duties on Mauritian sugar, and widespread anxiety about abolition laws, many inhabitants seemed to find it too risky to discuss any details of slaveholding with the commissioners. Colebrooke and Blair even speculated that, prior to their arrival, an agreement of some kind had been made among certain residents to not admit anything to the commission about slave-trading; they noted that French-Mauritian inhabitants were particularly unhelpful.<sup>29</sup>

The commissioners began compiling their findings and their final recommendations to the Crown in 1829, including a separate report specifically about the slave trade in Mauritius.<sup>30</sup> However, the commissioners stayed in regular correspondence with London from 1823 when they first arrived in the Cape Colony, often sending along urgent news and recommendations. For example, in 1826, during their first year in Mauritius, Colebrooke and Blair wrote to London to inform the government that a Guardian (Protector) of Slaves needed to be urgently appointed to the colony, as the state of slavery there was particularly severe. They also recommended early in their tenure in Mauritius that a Slave Registry be established and its proper use enforced among all residents. Copies of their final reports were eventually sent back to Mauritius after 1829, though it is difficult to ascertain who may have read them. We do know that many new

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<sup>27</sup> Despatch from Sir William Nicolay to Lord Glenelg, "Mauritius Schools & Colleges, 1835-1840," 25 January 1836, Mauritius, CO 167/227, NA.

<sup>28</sup> William Colebrooke and William Blair, "Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry upon the Slave Trade at Mauritius, to the Right Honourable William Huskisson, one of His Majesty's Principal Secretaries of State, 12 March 1828, Mauritius," in "Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry upon the Slave Trade at Mauritius, ordered by the House of Commons," 1 June 1829, Parliamentary Papers Online, (338), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Colebrooke and Blair, "Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry upon the Slave Trade," 3.

<sup>30</sup> Their final reports on all matters that fell under the commission's mandate were still being submitted to the Crown well into 1833.

laws related to slaveholding were introduced to the island from 1828 onwards to reflect recommendations made by the CEE. The Office of the Protector of Slaves, for example, was eventually introduced on the commissioners' recommendation.

Their final report on the slave trade also contained summaries of testimonies from numerous officials, including the Chief of Police, workers employed at the Custom House—where illegal slaves sometimes entered the colony—and summaries of accounts taken from enslaved peoples. It is worth noting that the latter testimonies could only be made through the medium of attorneys appointed to this task, or the white, male acquaintances, friends, or employers of an enslaved person, either in writing or orally to a clerk. For example, in one case (explored in the next section), a “Mr. Sanson,” described by a clerk as an “English octogenarian,” petitioned fervently for the freedom of an enslaved woman named Estelle.<sup>31</sup>

While this final CEE report on the slave trade in Mauritius was only forty-five pages in length, the National Archives at Kew in London hold multiple volumes of appendices to this report.<sup>32</sup> The report is also available digitally through the UK Parliamentary Papers database, although the appendices, which hold the accounts of hundreds of unfree and free people of colour, have never been digitized—an example of the “colonizing” activities and effects of archivists who often view information written by members of the white elite to be more worthy of public consumption than the narratives of colonized peoples, which are often relegated to dusty boxes requiring specialized on-site access.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “No. 11: Case of Estelle, who is represented by Mr. Sanson, to be detained illegally in slavery,” 21 September 1827, Port Louis, CO 415/4, NA.

<sup>32</sup> See CO 415/1–10, NA.

<sup>33</sup> For more on this important subject, see Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*; Stephanie Smallwood, “The Politics of the Archive and History’s Accountability to the Enslaved,” *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (2016): 117–32; Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Antoinette Burton, “Archive Stories: Gender in the Making of Imperial and Colonial Histories,” in ed. Philippa Levine, *Gender and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Ann

In its report, the CEE concluded that the slave trade had continued openly and illicitly well beyond 1810 when Mauritius (formerly Île de France) became a British territory, and that many British officials were complicit in the trade. What's more (and this is linked to the six attestations by unfree women given below), freedom was being illegally denied to some bonded men and women by slaveholders, due to complications related to manumission and bequests, the outright deception of bondspeople, and questionable practices engaged in by Royal Navy anti-slavery squadrons and the British colonial government. In the latter case, so-called "government slaves" were commonly employed on the island under the colonial government's purview.

The commissioners likewise reported that the slave trade was alive and well in Mauritius, and between it and the Seychelles, Île Bourbon (Réunion), Madagascar, Zanzibar, and Mozambique. The commissioners also named former Governor of Mauritius Robert Townsend Farquhar (g. 1810–17; 1820–23) as having "supported" French planters in continuing the trade in enslaved labourers.<sup>34</sup> They also revealed that, until roughly 1819, slave registration and custom records were missing and unreliable, and that many documents related to civil status were either fraudulent or had been purposely destroyed. In fact, the CEE recommended a law be introduced whereby "12 years labour in irons" be the punishment for any persons

guilty of destroying the proofs of civil state and condition of a free subject, an enactment which strictly applies to false registration, but which has never been enforced in any instance of which we are aware, although questionable titles have been raised to the possession of persons and their descendants as slaves who had been born in freedom.<sup>35</sup>

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Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Colebrooke and Blair, "Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry upon the Slave Trade," 10.

<sup>35</sup> Colebrooke and Blair, "Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry upon the Slave Trade," 42.



In this statement, the commissioners directly addressed the negative implications—for unfree peoples—caused by registration and custom house fraud, and civil status papers being destroyed. Marie Saladin and her husband, for example, whose case the commissioners heard, were never able to find papers from Marie’s childhood stating that she had been born a free person. In fact, there is a chance that the papers had never been drawn up by her first adoptive family, and that fraudulent bills of sale or other claims to Marie and her children, as property, were perhaps drafted by her second adoptive family, the Barillons. Thus, enslaved peoples, and sometimes free people of colour, were being denied the opportunity to attain manumission or freedom due to identity documents being altered by those who benefited economically from enslavement.

In their concluding remarks, Colebrooke and Blair recommended that newer, stronger laws be introduced, and that more reliable officials be hired in Mauritius to ensure that new enslaved peoples were not being introduced illegally to the island, or being transferred between islands for commercial purposes. More broadly, they suggested that the number of slaves on the island be reduced, and that in order to quell the “apprehension of colonists” in doing so, new “free labourers not liable to be reduced to slavery” be introduced to the island—specifically, Chinese labourers.<sup>36</sup> As much scholarship has shown, an indentured labour scheme from South Asia to Mauritius began in 1836, and Chinese contract workers were brought to the island in the 1840s, as well.<sup>37</sup>

A final topic of inquiry within the final report relates to the slaves and “apprentices” who were captured from slaving vessels in the Indian Ocean by the British Royal Navy, and held in

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<sup>36</sup> Colebrooke and Blair, “Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry upon the Slave Trade,” 45.

<sup>37</sup> See Marina Carter and James Ng Foong Kwong, *Abacus and Mah Jong: Sino-Mauritian Settlement and Economic Consolidation* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Marina Carter, *Servant, Sirdars, Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834–1874* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen*; and Teelock, *Bitter Sugar*.

Mauritius by the colonial government. These captives were not given a choice to return to their countries of origin. Instead, they were deposited at the nearest port town, which in many cases was Port Louis. Ship captains gained monetary “prizes” for the number of enslaved persons they “rescued” from slaving vessels (hence the colloquial term “prize blacks” or “prize negroes”). The recaptive slaves became the responsibility of the colonial government, and were distributed to various inhabitants of the island to perform a variety of works, often on fourteen-year contracts (more on this in Part Two). The commissioners collected a great deal of documentation pertaining to captives. They concluded that “apprentices who are captured from slaving vessels are then usually just thrown back into labour just as harsh as being enslaved under a master.”<sup>38</sup> The CEE appendices contain a wealth of information about this population in Mauritius. As the following case studies demonstrate, the question of freedom, how to achieve freedom, and whether recaptive slaves, as well as other groups of enslaved labourers, should really be given freedom, arose again and again.

### *Case Studies of Contested Freedom*

Within the CEE appendices, detailed information can be gleaned pertaining to individual cases of enslaved women seeking freedom—this includes women like Marie Saladin who lived in a state of precarious freedom, and women in “government” enslavement or government “apprenticeship.” To illustrate the range of circumstances bondswomen endured, this section will highlight six cases, each of which the CEE recorded as evidence of on-going slaveholding in

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<sup>38</sup> Colebrooke and Blair, “Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry upon the Slave Trade,” 44.

Mauritius. These cases present an opportunity to reflect on the complexities of freedom, manumission, coercion, and deception in slaveholding. I will begin with the shorter cases of Nina, Estelle, Elizabeth, and Victorine, followed by the more complex case of Catherine, and lastly, additional information regarding the case of Marie Saladin and her family.

### **Case of Nina**

Nina, an enslaved woman belonging to a Mme. Courbon, testified to John Finniss, Chief Commissary of Police in Mauritius, that she had travelled from Mauritius with her mistress nearly twenty years prior to Pondicherry, a French-held port city on the southeast coast of India. Her mistress, upon leaving Pondicherry in 1824, left Nina with her daughter, a Mme. Grevier, who sailed with Nina back to Mauritius later that same year. On the voyage, Grevier told Nina that she was being granted her freedom, and that Nina was listed as a “free woman” in her passport, which was allegedly shown to a custom’s officer who boarded the vessel they travelled on (*La Confiance*).<sup>39</sup> However, upon her return to Mauritius in October 1824, Nina was retained in domestic slavery by Courbon. There is no indication of when Nina first approached the police to complain of her alleged illegal retention in slavery; Finniss first wrote to the commissioners on 17 March 1827 to inform them of Nina’s plight. Nine months later, in December 1827, the Chief of Police submitted further correspondence to the commissioners, which stated that Courbon was also holding Nina’s daughter, Hermance, in bondage.<sup>40</sup> After examining the

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<sup>39</sup> “No. 5: Case of ‘Nina,’ a female slave of Mme. Courbon of Port Louis,” 17 March 1827, Port Louis, CO 415/4, NA.

<sup>40</sup> Letter by John Finniss, Chief Commissary of Police, to Mr. Blanc, Secretary to the Governor, 18 December 1827, Port Louis, CO 415/4, NA.

registers of the Custom House, and the “import manifest” from the French ship *La Confiance*, the Attorney General of Mauritius declared that Nina was, as she claimed, a free woman.

Although Hermance was not mentioned in the earlier documents relating to this case, Nina was by then seeking freedom both for herself and her daughter. In late December 1827, the Chief Secretary to the Governor addressed the commissioners to inform them that the Governor had ordered Mme. Courbon to give Hermance back to Nina, and that both mother and daughter would be “registered in the same way,” that is, as free women.<sup>41</sup>

### **Case of Estelle**

Born in Madagascar, Estelle was brought to Mauritius by her parents as a free person at the age of four or five. One of her parents died shortly after their arrival. An English “octogenarian” named Mr. Sanson addressed the commissioners on 21 September 1827 on Estelle’s behalf, though no indication was given as to Estelle and Sanson’s relation to one another. In 1820, Sanson first submitted a petition for Estelle’s freedom to the interim governor at the time, General Ralph Darling. He based this petition on the grounds that Estelle had been in bondage to a woman named Marie Louise Bougoule from 1799 to 1815, in which year Bougoule died, and Estelle had subsequently been detained illegally in slavery by two men, Julien and Cadet (no surnames given), who rented out her labour to the Custom House. Sanson argued that the two men had no legal authority to take possession of Estelle. He concluded that Estelle was a free

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<sup>41</sup> Letter by Mr. Blanc, Chief Secretary to the Governor, to John Finniss, Chief Commissary of Police, 24 December 1827, Port Louis, CO 415/4, NA.

person “without support nor parents in this country.”<sup>42</sup> The outcome of this case, as with most others, was unfortunately not included in the CEE appendices.

### **Case of Elizabeth**

Elizabeth’s case was brought before the commissioners in November 1827. As a bondswoman, Elizabeth alleged that her slaveholder, Mme. Derville, promised nine years prior that if Elizabeth’s husband—a free white man—paid 400 dollars, he could purchase her freedom. At the time, the husband paid part of this sum, 250 dollars, to Derville, using funds earned by selling one of his own slaves. Over the course of the following eight or nine years, Elizabeth earned and saved a further one hundred dollars for the purpose of purchasing her own freedom. The person with whom Elizabeth was living in 1827, a Mr. Dabau, offered to pay the final fifty dollars. However, Derville then reneged on her former promise and refused to sell Elizabeth unless she paid her 150 dollars in “ready money” or 200 dollars within three months. Elizabeth was unable to pay, and as of November 1827, when this case was brought before the CEE, she was still not free.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> “No. 11: Case of Estelle,” 21 September 1827, Port Louis, CO 415/4, NA.

<sup>43</sup> “No. 13: Case of Elizabeth, slave of Mr. Derville at Mapon,” 6 November 1827, Port Louis, CO 415/4, NA.

## **Case of Victorine**

Victorine, an enslaved woman living at Poudre d'Or, a village on the east coast of Mauritius, dictated a letter addressed to the commissioners on 22 May 1828. She stated that her former slaveholder, Guillaume Le Roux, testified to a fellow resident of Mauritius, M. Chauvaud, that upon his death, Victorine and another woman (referred to as Marie Mozambique) were to be freed. Upon Le Roux's death in 1818, neither woman was freed, and subsequently Chauvaud had also died. After Chauvaud's death, Victorine and Marie Mozambique became the property of Chauvaud's children. In addition, Victorine had six children of her own (all above seven years of age) who, because of their mother's slave status, were also presently held in bondage by the Chauvaud family. Victorine stated that she had also been prevented from seeing her children (presumably by the Chauvaud's) from the time that she had first complained to the Courts of First Instance. At the end of her statement, Victorine asked the commissioners to help her and her children to "reclaim their rights."<sup>44</sup>

## **Case of Catherine**

On the last day of November 1823, Catherine, an Indian woman originally from the Malabar region of southern India, narrated to Edward Byam, the Commissary-General of Police in Mauritius, her account of being enslaved. A copy of this narrative was given to the CEE, and

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<sup>44</sup> "No: 14: Case of Victorine, female slave of Mr. Chauvaud," 21 April 1828, CO 415/4, NA; Letter by Victorine to the Commissioners of Eastern Enquiry, 22 May 1828, Port Louis, CO 415/4, NA.

appended with other police papers.

Catherine recounted a story of being “seduced” from her home during a period of “distress,” and sold into slavery to the Isle of France.<sup>45</sup> She recalled living at her aunt’s house in Malabar, when she was met by a man who told her of service work in Pondicherry where she could earn two to three rupees per month, and possibly be married. Agreeing to take up this work, Catherine travelled to Pondicherry (an eight-day journey) with the man, only to be told that they were not yet at their destination, and would be travelling the remainder of the way by ship. She boarded a vessel, one of a fleet of four, and was transported to Île de France during the “revolutionary” period (probably in the 1790s). Once they arrived, she was sold to a free Malabar woman named Flore, who paid her seven dollars a month for “nominal liberty.” Catherine emphasized that “an immense number of free persons in India” were sold into slavery in Île de France in this manner. She recounted that she had “permission to work on her own account” and thus became acquainted with a Malabar man from the Mapon region of Mauritius, who eventually purchased her from Flore for 240 dollars. When this man died, Catherine continued to live in Mapon with another woman “of her own caste and nation.” It is unclear whether Catherine remained in a state of slavery at this moment. This story was no doubt very valuable for the CEE, as they investigated how illicit slave-trading had managed to continue in Mauritius. Labourers from India, for example, were being coerced and sold as enslaved persons on the island well after the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. Catherine concluded sadly that her aunt in India would never know what happened to her, and she would never see her birth family again.

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<sup>45</sup> Edward Byam, “No. 3: The Account of a Free Woman of India sold into Slavery in the Isle of France, as narrated by herself to me, this last day of November 1823,” 30 November 1823, Mauritius, Appendix A, CO 415/3, NA.

## Case of Marie Saladin & Family

As an infant, Marie was a foundling and she was taken in by two separate “benefactresses” (adoptive mothers and families) over the course of her childhood. Throughout her accounts, Marie claimed with certainty that her mother was white and her father a man of colour, though it is unclear how she knew this to be true, as she was separated from her parents in infancy. However, it was not uncommon for babies to be left on doorsteps in Port Louis, particularly when the parents’ relationship was considered illicit, like that of a white woman and a man of colour.<sup>46</sup>

The Saladins, living in the Flacq district (see Figure 1), were the first family young Marie lived with. They housed her until she was ten years old, when Mme. Saladin suddenly died. Marie was devastated by this loss; she remembered fondly calling the Saladins “mother and father.” A woman by the name of Veuve Quetel, a neighbour in Flacq, approached the widowed Mr. Saladin to propose that Marie might come to live with her family, as a companion to her two daughters. Mr. Saladin allegedly consented under the condition that Mme. Quetel raise Marie with “all the regards of a mother for her daughter.”<sup>47</sup> Marie then lived with the Quetel family until adolescence, when she met her future partner, Etienne, around the age of fifteen.

In 1812, after living together for nearly twenty years, Marie and Etienne wished to marry, but in order to do so they required Marie’s birth certificate, which she lacked, to prove her civil and racial status. The Saladin family had failed to register Marie’s *état civil* (civil status) with colonial administrators when they took Marie in as an infant. Under both French and British rule, the names of all free persons in Mauritius were recorded in Civil Status Registers maintained by

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<sup>46</sup> Meghan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 131.

<sup>47</sup> “Statement and Documents relative to the Case of ‘Marie Saladin,’” 10 November 1826, CO 415/4, NA.



local government offices; enslaved individuals were listed, as property, in separate slave registers. Children normally carried their mother's civil status in colonial British Mauritius. If Marie was found to be the daughter of a white woman, for example, she would technically have been a free person; however, the lack of birth certificate likely indicates that either her parents did not want their union to be recorded, or that the document was simply destroyed at an unknown date. The stigma attached to mixed-race unions, particularly of white women with non-white men, was strong in British colonial settings, including Mauritius, where laws were put in place to prevent these relationships.<sup>48</sup> Her lack of birth certificate and abandonment as a child perhaps strengthens Marie's claim that her mother was a white woman and her father was a person of colour.

Etienne, Marie's partner, was unable to locate the required birth certificate. He subsequently submitted a request to George Schmitt, the Grand Judge and Commissary of Justice in Mauritius, asking permission to marry Marie, and in so doing, to formally "legitimize and recognize" their nine living children.<sup>49</sup> Marie and Etienne likely knew that it was imperative to establish their children's statuses as firmly "free" in a slave-holding society where freedom was often tenuous. The Grand Judge conducted research into the case, and reported to Etienne that Marie was, in fact, legally enslaved to one of Veuve Quetel's daughters.<sup>50</sup>

This piece of information came from an attorney, Mr. Lacroix, who worked on behalf of the Barillon family. By then, the Quetel daughter in question had married into the Barillon family, and Lacroix claimed that Veuve Quetel had given Marie as a wedding gift at this union.

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<sup>48</sup> For more on this subject, see Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, and Radhika Mohanram, *Imperial White: Race, Diaspora, and the British Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> "Statement and Documents relative to the Case of 'Marie Saladin,'" 10 November 1826. This likely had dual meaning: referring to the children being legitimized through the marriage of their parents (children born to unwed parents were deemed "illegitimate"), and recognized as being the children of free parents, rather than potentially the children of an enslaved (or formerly enslaved) parent.

<sup>50</sup> "Statement and Documents relative to the Case of 'Marie Saladin,'" 10 November 1826.

Marie, for her part, strongly denied the allegation that she was, or had ever been, enslaved. She declared that both Quetel daughters were simply her childhood companions, and that they lived together as such in the Quetel family home. In her declaration to the Commissioners of Eastern Enquiry, Marie, then aged forty-seven, proclaimed under oath, “I have never belonged to anyone, and [I] will never belong to anyone.”<sup>51</sup> Lacroix, for his part, could not produce any titles, contracts, or other documents proving his claim that Marie was enslaved. The Grand Judge, who Etienne had initially approached, visited the notary who had drawn up the marriage contract between Mme. Barillon (néé Quetel) and her new husband, and could find no mention therein of Marie being a gift at their wedding. The Grand Judge therefore declared that Lacroix’s claims were false, and ruled that Etienne and Marie could be legally married, and their children “legitimized and recognized.”

Yet, this series of events was only the beginning of what became a complex legal struggle for Marie Saladin and her family: Lacroix extorted money from Etienne, and drew up false bills of sale for one of Marie’s daughters (before Lacroix eventually went bankrupt himself). It appears that the Barillons had indeed registered Marie and her children as their enslaved property in the official censuses for 1815 and 1819. In the slave registers for 1826, Marie—with all her living children *and* grandchildren—were still listed as the property of the Barillon family.<sup>52</sup> Of special note in the CEE appendices is a letter by Marie, addressed to the Barillon household, refusing the request that she and her children present themselves for “inspection” as enslaved labourers.<sup>53</sup> This is followed by another letter from Etienne to the Grand Judge and Commissary of Justice, in which he (Etienne) stated that, until the entire affair was cleared up, he wished to

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<sup>51</sup> “Statement and Documents relative to the Case of ‘Marie Saladin,’” 10 November 1826.

<sup>52</sup> “Mauritius: Personal Slaves, 1-335,” Slave Registers, Office of Registry of Colonial Slaves and Slave Compensation Commission, 1826, CO T71/585, NA.

<sup>53</sup> Marie Florimond, “Copy of a letter addressed to Mr. Lafèvre, attorney of the house Barilhon, in the place of Mr. Lacroix who went bankrupt, containing my refusal to satisfy the request to present myself and my children, like slaves, to be inspected,” 17 November 1826, Port Louis, CO 415/4, NA.

confirm on record that his wife and children were all “born free.” To this end, he submitted to the CEE a detailed family tree.<sup>54</sup>

This document, compiled by Etienne and Marie, is very informative, as it contains the full names, ages, and occupations of a free family residing in early nineteenth-century Port Louis. Marie gave birth to thirteen children, of whom nine were still living in 1826: three boys (beginning with the eldest: François, Louis Etienne, and Etienne), and six girls (Ame Catherine, Julienne, Marie Amanda, Marie Therese, Marie Ernestine, and Nanette Etiennette). The two eldest boys were blacksmiths, like their father. The two eldest girls had three and four young children, respectively, and were both married to free men of colour. The three middle daughters, still children, were all listed as occupied in “sewing” (as seamstresses).<sup>55</sup>

The family’s struggle for official recognition as free people continued until 1832. Marie’s name, in particular, continued to appear in official government correspondence and memorandums from 1829, 1830, 1831, and 1832. What’s more, some of these documents narrate the overall order of events differently from that recounted by Marie and Etienne, and demonstrate different interpretations of manumission and freedom. Marie always identified as a free child and then free woman. However, it seems that the colonial government and both of her white “benefactor” families viewed her as being in a state of bondage.

In April 1829, the Protector of Slaves, Richard Thomas, became involved. He wrote a letter to Mr. Lefevre, another of the Barillon’s attorneys, stating that Mme. Barillon had departed from Mauritius in 1809, and had left instructions with Lacroix (their former attorney) to permit Marie and her children “to employ themselves for their own account until such time as she

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<sup>54</sup> Letter by Etienne Florimond to the Grand Judge and Commissary of Justice in Mauritius, 18 November 1826, CO 415/4, NA; Etienne Florimond, “A census of my family to be submitted to the Commissioners of Inquiry, in Mauritius,” 17 November 1826, Port Louis, CO 415/4, NA.

<sup>55</sup> Etienne Florimond, “A census of my family,” 17 November 1826.

[Marie] should be able to pay him [Lacroix] the sum of 1000 dollars as a consideration for the Manumission of herself and her children until their affranchisement.”<sup>56</sup> In 1809, Marie would have been thirty years old, living with Etienne and their five young children. She would have been completely unaware of these instructions, and her perceived slave status. Despite the lack of notarized paperwork to this effect, Marie and her children were legally considered the property of the Barillon household. It seems likely that when Veuve Quetel took Marie in at the age of ten to be a “companion” to her daughters, she discretely intended for Marie to be her daughter’s slave, though Marie was evidently never made aware of this. Did the Quetel family actually buy Marie from the Saladins? Or did they in fact promise to raise Marie as a daughter? As concluded in the final CEE report, duplicity and illicit transactions related to slave-trading were commonplace in Mauritius throughout the early 1800s. Marie and her children were very likely victims of this.

Protector Thomas, in the same letter from April 1829, indicated that the former attorney, Lacroix, had obtained 300 dollars from Marie and Etienne (towards the 1000-dollar sum requested by Mme. Barillon). In Marie’s narration of events, Lacroix extorted the 300 dollars from Etienne, under the guise of marriage fees, and from her son-in-law, through false and illegal bills of sale that Lacroix drew up for one of Marie’s daughters.<sup>57</sup> In July 1830, Thomas wrote to G.A. Barry, the Chief Secretary of Government, seeking an appeal from the Governor’s Privy Council on behalf of Marie and her family. Between April 1829 and July 1830, the Saladin-Florimond case was tried in the Court of Appeal, and ruled in favour of the Barillon family. As Thomas later wrote, “Marie Saladin and her children and grandchildren are doomed to return to slavery, after having lived some of them 20 years the major part born in a state of

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<sup>56</sup> Letter from Richard Thomas, Protector of Slaves, to M. Lefèvre, Attorney to the Barillon Family, 29 April 1829, Port Louis, f. IC 22, National Archives of Mauritius (hereafter NAM), Coromandel.

<sup>57</sup> “Statement and Documents relative to the Case of ‘Marie Saladin,’” 10 November 1826.

manumission.”<sup>58</sup> Thomas added that the ruling involved “a doom little short of death to 17 or 18 unfortunate individuals, and decided, as it appears to me upon mistaken grounds.”<sup>59</sup>

One year later, Thomas corresponded again with the Chief Secretary of Government, strongly recommending a petition submitted to the Governor of Mauritius “praying for a loan of 2000 dollars from Government to enable the parties to secure the freedom of Marie Saladin and her family.”<sup>60</sup> Thomas further explained that the Barillon’s most recent attorney, a Mr. Bestel, had refused to complete the official *affranchisement* (manumission) of Marie Saladin—who still maintained that she had never been in bondage—without a payment of 2000 dollars to be made by the Protector.<sup>61</sup> By 1830, all contracts drawn up between slaves and slaveholders for the purchase of their liberty went through the Protector of Slaves office, which is why Thomas was the individual taking this case up with the Governor. Five years after submitting her first petition to the CEE, Marie’s claims to freedom were still being denied by the Barillons and colonial authorities alike.<sup>62</sup> Marie’s story highlights many of the ambiguities, as well as the precariousness of freedom, for people of colour in Mauritius.

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<sup>58</sup> Letter by Richard Thomas, Protector of Slaves, to Colonel Barry, Chief Secretary to Government, 12 July 1830, Port Louis, f. IC 21, NAM. The term “manumission” is confusing here, given that Marie, having never been legally sold and bought, was technically never manumitted. Thomas makes it sound like she *was* manumitted at one point, and then re-enslaved later. This was likely not the case.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas to Barry, 12 July 1830, f. IC 21, NAM.

<sup>60</sup> Letter by Richard Thomas, Protector of Slaves, to James Smith, Esq., Chief Secretary to Government, 16 April 1831, Port Louis, f. IC 21, NAM.

<sup>61</sup> Letter by Richard Thomas, Protector of Slaves, to James Smith, Esq., Chief Secretary to Government, 8 December 1831, Port Louis, f. IC 21, NAM.

<sup>62</sup> In 1831, the case was brought before the Privy Council. During my archival fieldwork, I was not able to uncover how or if the case was ever resolved.

## *Perceptions of (Un)freedom*

Each of these women and their stories of (un)freedom were relegated to the appendices of the CEE's report to the imperial government. The goal of the CEE was, in some respects, data collection, and the multiple volumes of collected correspondence and appended information reflect this. However, it is crucial that these narratives, recounted by free and unfree women in British Mauritius, are extracted from the colonial archive and considered as important accounts of bondage and freedom. In the case of Marie Saladin, her narrative of freedom countered the claims of the white elites (the Barillons and their three attorneys) around her. These counter-narratives need to be included in historical analyses of slavery in Mauritius.

What do these six cases demonstrate? First, enslaved women struggling for manumission or freedom from bondage often did so with the status and safety of their children in mind. The idea that the condition of freedom, for some, was related to leaving a "legacy" for one's children and grandchildren fits well here, particularly in the cases of Nina, Victorine, and Marie Saladin. Second, the CEE was one of only a few colonial bodies to which, in the 1820s, enslaved women made complaints about their condition and argued for manumission and legal rights. They did likewise to the Protector of Slaves office (the topic of chapter three), and sometimes to the police, as Catherine did above. No other institutions solicited complaints from the unfree population, nor were generally intended to be sympathetic to the plight of bonded peoples.

The above cases also reflect the difficulties inherent to verbal agreements made between the enslaved and slaveholders. For Nina and Elizabeth, the verbal statements of slaveholders, relating to manumission and freedom, were untrustworthy. In Elizabeth's case, it appears that Mme. Derville had attempted to extort money from Elizabeth—and those trying to help her—

through multiple verbal agreements. Marie Saladin's supposed slave status was also constructed through lies and duplicity, and Marie and Etienne were both aware that they required physical documentation attesting to Marie's free status. These cases point to wider trends in colonial slaveholding, where the words and witness statements of bondspeople were deemed inferior to those of white elites. What's more, duplicitous methods were commonly employed to enslave or re-enslave.

Beyond the six women whose stories are recounted above, many briefer, less detailed cases of women and men asking for their freedom appear in the CEE appendices. Some entries, like those of Adeline, Eliza, Marie, Esther, and Sophie, all from 1828, simply state the name of the slaveholder, and that the enslaved woman in question attended the office of the CEE for the purpose of "representing her claim to freedom."<sup>63</sup> Others, such as the entries for Lys and Nina (not the same Nina as above), recorded that the women making complaints about ill-treatment to the commissioners were directed instead to make their statements to the Police Office.<sup>64</sup> The CEE played a key role in highlighting contested freedom in the enslaved population in Mauritius, but it did not forcefully recommend the end of slavery. Instead, as Laidlaw suggests, the commissioners recommended reform rather than revolution—that is, amelioration rather than abolition. Indeed, as the above cases illustrate, it was very difficult for a slave to attain freedom in British Mauritius.

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<sup>63</sup> Cases of Marie, Esther, and Sophie (May 1828), and cases of Adeline and Eliza (November 1828), all in *Journal of the Proceedings of H.M. Commissioners of Inquiry at Mauritius*, 1 October 1826 to 15 December 1828, CO 415/1, NA.

<sup>64</sup> This was common practice before the introduction of the Protector of Slaves in 1829.

## *Part Two: The Contested Freedom of Recaptive Africans*

In July 1812, Governor of Mauritius Robert Townsend Farquhar wrote to the Earl of Liverpool expressing concern at the great expense of maintaining “government slaves” in Mauritius. These comprised 1,355 men, seventy-four women, and 359 children, of whom 440 men and twenty-four women were attached to the military. He further stated that it cost the public treasury 120,000 dollars a year to feed and clothe this “class” of labourers.<sup>65</sup> Using documents collected by the CEE and other colonial offices, this section will explore who “government slaves” typically were, their occupations, and reflections on how this population was sometimes discursively and physically subjugated in the same manner as chattel slaves. The archival material also offers crucial insights into gendered differences within this population, as for example in relation to the types of employment recaptives were hired to undertake, and their experiences of freedom, violence, and labour. The varying terminology used in colonial documentation to describe this group (“apprentices,” “government slaves,” and so on) will also be addressed.

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<sup>65</sup> “No. 10: Extract of a letter from Governor Farquhar to the Earl of Liverpool dated 30 July 1812, Port Louis, relative to the great expense of maintaining the Government Slaves,” CEE Appendices, A179, CO 415/8, NA.



### *Recaptive Africans and the British Royal Navy*

The British Royal Navy undertook anti-slavery measures in the early to mid-nineteenth century to capture vessels and slave traders still actively carrying slaves to or from British imperial outposts. In the Atlantic world, British Royal Navy squadrons intervened in slave-trading activities by raiding barracoons, detaining ships engaged in slave-trading, and ferrying the survivors of wrecked slave ships.<sup>66</sup> Similar activities took place in the western Indian Ocean, particularly in the seas around Mauritius. Marina Carter notes that before 1827, about ten per cent of Royal Navy captures were of French vessels in the waters around the Seychelles and Mascarene Islands, or on land.<sup>67</sup> After this period, “liberated Africans” (as they were more frequently referred to) were seized throughout Indian Ocean Africa and East Africa, including the Seychelles, Madagascar, the Mascarenes, and in the Mozambique Channel.<sup>68</sup>

In Mauritius and the sea surrounding it, bondspeople could be seized on-shore (generally near the coast) or at sea by the British Royal Navy. The first “rescued” captives reportedly landed in Mauritius in May 1811, and were placed as menial workers in the Port Louis police department.<sup>69</sup> Chattel slaves were still being brought to the island illegally well after 1807. In fact, the CEE concluded that, in total, between 30,000 and 50,000 slaves were introduced to Mauritius between 1811 and 1825.<sup>70</sup> One colonial government report estimated that between 1808 and 1827, roughly sixty-five vessels were seized at sea, and condemned at the Cape of

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<sup>66</sup> Daniel Domingues da Silva, David Eltis, Philip Misevich, and Olatunji Ojo, “The Diaspora of Africans Liberated from Slave Ships in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of African History* 55, no. 3 (2014): 348.

<sup>67</sup> Marina Carter, *The Last Slaves: Liberated Africans in Nineteenth-Century Mauritius* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Centre for Research on Indian Ocean Societies, 2003), 21.

<sup>68</sup> Carter, *The Last Slaves*, 21.

<sup>69</sup> Carter, *The Last Slaves*, 39.

<sup>70</sup> Carter, *The Last Slaves*, 7.

Good Hope or Mauritius.<sup>71</sup> From these ships, the British Royal Navy seized 5,000 “prize negroes,” 3,181 of whom were male and 867 female. Thirty-six of those vessels and 2,438 individuals were brought to Mauritius alone.

The British Admiralty paid out bounties for the successful detention and prosecution of slaving ships and their captains, and as a result, many of the enslaved people taken from those vessels were deemed “prize negroes.”<sup>72</sup> Royal Navy crews would technically steer the “prize” ship to the nearest port that housed a court of mixed commission, where the capture of the ship and its contents would be approved or disapproved. Robert Burroughs underscores the violence and high mortality of this process, even once ships were detained by the Royal Navy.<sup>73</sup> If a capture was judged legal by the courts, the enslaved parties on board generally disembarked at that port. From there, they were registered as “government slaves” at the local Custom House or port authority, and the colonial government typically apprenticed them out (usually on fourteen-year contracts) to private residents and employers. However, in Mauritius many remained in government service, and were referred to as “government slaves,” “government blacks,” or “liberated Africans.”<sup>74</sup> Marina Carter estimates that between 1813 and 1826, “liberated Africans” in Mauritius were hired out to 665 “masters,” some of whom were high-ranking British officials, like the governor, chief judge, and Charles Telfair, Secretary to the Governor.<sup>75</sup>

Unpacking this varying terminology is an important starting point. Marina Carter is one of the only scholars who has studied this particular group of labourers in the context of

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<sup>71</sup> “Return of Vessels & Negroes captured at Sea, and Negroes Seized on Shore & Condemned in the Vice-Admiralty Court at Mauritius,” as quoted in Marina Carter, *The Last Slaves*, 8.

<sup>72</sup> For more on this topic in the context of the Atlantic World, see Robert Burroughs, “Eyes on the Prize: Journeys in Slave Ships taken as Prizes by the Royal Navy,” *Slavery and Abolition* 31, no. 1 (2010): 101. For compelling narratives of British Royal Navy activities along the East African coast, see John Broich, *Squadron: Ending the African Slave Trade* (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2017).

<sup>73</sup> Burroughs, “Eyes on the Prize,” 101–2.

<sup>74</sup> Marina Carter, *The Last Slaves*, 8.

<sup>75</sup> Carter, *The Last Slaves*, 53. For more on Charles Telfair, Farquhar’s personal secretary and a well-documented plantation owner, see Chapter Four of this dissertation.

Mauritius. Carter asserts that “recaptive African” (or “recaptive person”) is a more accurate description for the enslaved peoples the Royal Navy seized on slaving vessels in the Indian Ocean. They were immediately transported to the Cape Colony, Bombay, Zanzibar, or the Mascarene Islands, where they re-entered captivity as unfree labourers held by local colonial governments.<sup>76</sup> Many other titles are given to this population in the archival material, including: “liberated African,” “emancipated black,” “apprentice,” “government apprentice,” and “government black.” It is not always clear how these distinctions were drawn, and some of these categories seem to be used interchangeably. For the purposes of this chapter, I will use “recaptives” and “recaptive person” to refer to this group, as well as “government slave,” as the latter was the terminology most commonly used in Mauritius.

By the mid-1820s then, hundreds of individuals were being retained in a state of government bondage, with little recourse for freedom. The National Archives of Mauritius holds a rich document with information about all “negroes who have been apprenticed at Mauritius and its Dependencies” from 1813 to 1826.<sup>77</sup> It indicates that 2,986 persons (with their names recorded) were “seized and condemned”; this refers to the process whereby British officials removed an enslaved person from a circumstance of slave-trading and brought them to a court or Custom House in Port Louis.<sup>78</sup> Of this number, 2,409 were apprenticed out.<sup>79</sup> Interestingly, ten “seized” persons were restored as free prior to entering apprenticeship, and, after being apprenticed, a further five were “restored as free.” Clearly there were mechanisms of some kind in place for individuals who were being illegally trafficked to be freed by colonial authorities,

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<sup>76</sup> Carter, *The Last Slaves*, 1.

<sup>77</sup> “Return of the Number of Negroes who have been Apprenticed at the Mauritius and its Dependencies, including names of the persons to whom apprenticed, each year, since capture,” Port Louis, ID 2, NAM.

<sup>78</sup> Carter, *The Last Slaves*, 38.

<sup>79</sup> More specifically, 291 died before being apprenticed, 51 were reported as missing, 224 were taken for military service, and ten were “restored” as free. “Return of the Number of Negroes who have been Apprenticed at the Mauritius,” Port Louis, ID 2, NAM.

though unfortunately no information is provided about this process. Yet, the overwhelming majority of recaptives were forced back into bonded labour. By 1839, the Custom House recorded that government “apprentices” comprised three categories: most were with private employers or “masters,” performing a specific trade; a smaller number held menial jobs with local government in Port Louis; and a third group comprised apprentices who were “enlisted into the colony’s land and sea forces.”<sup>80</sup>

### *Occupations and Indenture*

Once “liberated” from slaving vessels by the Royal Navy, recaptives were not allowed to return to their countries of origin, nor were they given any choice of where to disembark. Most often, they were brought to port cities like Port Louis, where, as recaptives, they held varying roles and were controlled by a variety of measures. Private residents of Mauritius could choose to “hire” a recaptive on-contract (as an indentured labourer), to whom they agreed to provide food, shelter, clothing, and health care. However, they were not always eager to pay for hospital bills, for example, in cases where a labourer became gravely ill. Additionally, some government slaves were assigned to work for the Port House, the Engineering Department, and similar colonial offices in Port Louis. They were also “rented” out to the Royal College for domestic work.<sup>81</sup> In 1832, the Superintendent of the Matricule, the colonial office that oversaw government slaves, reported that some “government blacks” were also being “loaned temporarily” to the military, employed in fetching liana (long-stemmed, woody vines) to make baskets and brooms, and being

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<sup>80</sup> Carter, *The Last Slaves*, 58.

<sup>81</sup> Letter by the Provisieur du College Royal, “1828 – Rector of Royal College – Statement of Slaves employed at the Royal College,” 1 December 1828, Port Louis, RA 32, NAM.

housed at the *bagne* (jail and workhouse) for various duties.<sup>82</sup> From the early 1820s, recaptives were also employed in navigation and as mariners, sometimes travelling to Madagascar, Île Bourbon (Réunion), the Seychelles, and beyond.<sup>83</sup>

Occupations varied for government slaves, and some (mostly men) held highly skilled positions.<sup>84</sup> Recaptive women, like enslaved women, also had unique experiences of labour. For example, while all government apprentices were paid very low wages, men were typically paid slightly more than women.<sup>85</sup> As demonstrated below, in their attempts to curb spending, the colonial government also explored measures to relieve themselves of recaptive women.

A “Return of Prize Negroes” apprenticed at Mauritius from 1813 to 1827, contained in the CEE appendices, offers compelling information about occupations for recaptive women and men. Of the 2,419 individuals listed, 1,863 were men and 556 were women. Most recaptive women held traditionally female occupations. Of the women, 203 were listed as laundresses, 156 as house servants, 153 as seamstresses, twenty-one as washerwomen, sixteen as farm servants, three as nursery maids, and two as embroiderers. Of the two remaining recaptive women, one worked as a stocking knitter, and the other as a poulterer (one who sells poultry). Men, on the other hand, held many skilled job titles, including carpenters, gardeners, cooks, hair dressers, grooms, mariners, painters, cabinet makers, blacksmiths, brick makers, and shipwrights. A select few were appointed to even more highly skilled positions, including watchmakers and shoemakers.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> P. Salter, “List of government blacks and the departments to which they were despatched,” 31 December 1832, Port Louis, RA 32, NAM.

<sup>83</sup> CEE Appendix A, no. 39, “Return of Slaves employed as mariners, taken from, and brought into Mauritius from February 1819 to October 1826,” CO 415/4, NA.

<sup>84</sup> Carter estimates that unskilled adult males and children earned three “rix” dollars per month, while women and girls earned, on average, two. Carter, *The Last Slaves*, 60–1.

<sup>85</sup> Carter, *The Last Slaves*, 60–1.

<sup>86</sup> P. Salter, Acting Collector of Customs, Custom House, “Return of Prize Negroes, apprenticed at Mauritius, from 1813 the earliest date to 1827, inclusive,” 31 August 1827, Port Louis, CO 167/143, NA.

Furthermore, the archives provide compelling glimpses into the experiences of recaptives related to health and religion. Private residents of Mauritius who hired government slaves generally considered the labourer to still be the overarching responsibility of the colonial government. In one account, Mr. Johns, a clerk in the Royal Engineer's Office, wrote to Mr. Blanc, Secretary to the Governor, asking that his apprentice woman, Louise, who had fallen ill and was treated in hospital, be taken off his hands. Upon being discharged from hospital, Louise's health was such that she could no longer perform any of the tasks required of her. Johns wrote:

I am perfectly aware, Sirs, that by the conditions of the Indenture I have signed, I am bound to provide her with Medical treatment, in case of sickness, but as there is every reason to fear she will not be of any service in my family for the future (a circumstance differing so widely from casual sickness), I am induced to hope you will grant me the favour of cancelling the indenture and relieving me from her.<sup>87</sup>

It is unclear whether Johns was relieved of his apprentice, and there is little information about what may have happened to Louise should she have been removed from Johns' home. Again, while the colonial government recorded all recaptive deaths and hospital stays, it is unclear from the records what became of apprentices who were not ill enough to remain in hospital but unable to gainfully work.<sup>88</sup> They presumably were kept as wards of the state, and perhaps forced to live in the Camps designated for them outside Port Louis. In a second case, recorded by the Police Office in January 1832, Reverend Denny, First Civil Chaplain to

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<sup>87</sup> Letter from Mr. Johns, Royal Engineer's Office, Caudan, to Mr. Blanc, Esq., 10 July 1826, Port Louis, CO 415/11, NA.

<sup>88</sup> Documents held by the Superintendent of the Matricule's office contain information about government slaves who served in the military (and died in this service), and those who were deceased following an illness in hospital. Port Louis, RA525, NAM.

Mauritius, reported a government slave in his service, Etienne, for committing robbery and being of “bad character.”<sup>89</sup> It seems that residents may not have been obligated to maintain the indenture contracts in certain circumstances.

Attempts were also made to integrate recaptives into Mauritian society through religious activities. The Office of the Matricule reported that by June 1828, thirty-eight government slaves had been baptized into the Protestant faith, and 692 in the Catholic faith.<sup>90</sup> These numbers indicate, as further explored in chapter four of this dissertation, that the Protestant church struggled to find a foothold in early British Mauritius. However, there is little information about who initiated this process—the recaptives, colonial government, private residents, or religious groups.

As Governor Farquhar expressed in 1812, government slaves were largely the financial responsibility of the colonial government, which as a result, was quite meticulous with its record-keeping, and continually sought ways to cut the cost of maintaining government slaves. Within colonial administration, government slaves specifically fell inside the purview of the Superintendent of the Matricule’s Office in Port Louis. By 1830, the duties of this office consisted:

in attending to the distribution, health, lodging, clothing, and feeding of Government Blacks; [attending] to the daily complaints of the blacks amongst themselves, and which often requires long investigations – [and] visits and inspects the different camps occupied by the Government Blacks and their families.<sup>91</sup>

Clerks were hired to keep registers of all government slaves, and process the allocations of

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<sup>89</sup> Letter from the Police Office, 25 January 1832, Port Louis, RA 525, NAM.

<sup>90</sup> “Return of Government Slaves of all ages who have been baptized with the Protestant and Catholic Churches of Mauritius,” 3 June 1828, Port Louis, A/179, no. 14, CO 415/167, NA.

<sup>91</sup> “Miscellaneous Returns, 1830-1832,” Port Louis, IA 42, NAM.

firewood and provisions to them. A head “commandeur,” often a recaptive person himself, was appointed to police this population, particularly in the so-called “Yoloff” camps around Port Louis where government slaves were housed.

Further, several measures were deliberated to lower the cost of maintaining government slaves, and some residents expressed fear about what could happen should all government slaves be fully removed from government dependence, and emancipated. To address both concerns, a committee was struck in 1826 to reconsider the regulations in place that governed clothing, firewood, and food rations for government slaves. Indeed, many of the conclusions reached by this committee spoke to the mixed economic fears on the part of the island’s colonial and elite residents.

First, the committee reported that the portions of rice, meat, and tobacco allocated to each family of government slaves, including each child, were much too high. It alleged that the extra food and tobacco that remained uneaten or unused immediately was being “hoarded” and sold by the parents for “articles in all probability improper and unwholesome for them.”<sup>92</sup> In an attempt to crowdsource the issue, representatives from the committee visited the *bagne*, where many government slaves worked and lived (not necessarily as inmates), to gather opinions and feelings related to rationing. The committee reported that, when it suggested to the government slaves that their food portions be cut and diet changed, both men and women exclaimed that they were “perfectly satisfied” with their present ration and wished for no changes to be made. This response was ultimately ignored by the committee, which went ahead with the recommendation that the portions be reduced “to better suit their diet.”<sup>93</sup> Clearly, the committee was intent on reducing costs associated with feeding government slaves at the *bagne*. The committee further

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<sup>92</sup> Committee report, 17 July 1826, Port Louis, A. 179, CO 415/8, NA.

<sup>93</sup> Committee report, 17 July 1826.



recommended that, to save on firewood, all recaptives working in certain government facilities, including the *bagne*, the Port, the Engineers Office, and the Police Office, should be induced to “mess together”—that is, cook and eat their meals at the same time, to save on the costs of firewood.

Reducing rations so that individuals could not sell or refashion extra items, and limiting firewood so that groups were forced to cook and eat together perhaps also points to a wish for increased surveillance over the population in question, by forcing them to spend more time dining together as one large group within one space at a specific time, and by limiting their food and cooking supplies, so as to more closely monitor their consumption habits. This wish for tighter control over (and therefore, fewer freedoms for) government slaves was exemplified further by another committee recommendation that, within each department, one or two government slaves should be selected as the “*commandeurs*” (heads, or commanders) to survey the group at large. Moreover, the committee suggested that the *commandeurs* be made comfortable and treated respectfully by colonial officials, so that the other government slaves would look up to this position with “ambition” and “as a reward for good conduct.”<sup>94</sup>

While the committee was drawing up its report, many Mauritian shop owners complained to the government that they would lose their livelihoods should they lose the earnings from providing food and clothing to government slaves.<sup>95</sup> And they had reason to worry, as word of impending emancipation steadily increased from 1830 onwards, and the population of government-held slaves began to dwindle. A letter by Governor Charles Colville (1770–1843) in October 1832 stated that within a month of emancipation, government slaves would cease

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<sup>94</sup> Committee report, 17 July 1826. There is not a great deal of information about the commanders. They seem to have approximated the role of a driver in many plantation regimes, and were employed as a tool of surveillance and manipulation by the colonial government. It is unclear whether these commanders had the power of corporal punishment over their fellow enslaved people.

<sup>95</sup> 22 Nov 1832, Port Louis, RA525, NAM; 3 December 1832, Port Louis, RA525, NAM.

drawing rations for food and clothing, and that any remaining wages would be paid to them within that final month. Certificates of good conduct would also be granted to those “deserving of them.”<sup>96</sup> While it was clearly financially advantageous for the colonial government to emancipate government slaves, it seems that measures were requested to ensure that white elites would not lose money in the process, and that strict control over the population would still be maintained.

### *Recaptive Women and Children*

To further reduce the financial burden caused by government slaves in the late 1820s, the colonial government considered austerity measures specifically related to recaptive women. To this end, a list of “female slaves belonging to government” was drawn up in June 1828, a copy of which was given to the Commission of Eastern Enquiry. This list contains 293 women, their names, ages, “connections,” and number of children, living and deceased. The fact that the names, ages, and reproductive histories of these women were recorded is very valuable for historians, as these details are rarely available in the archive. In some cases, it is impossible to tell what the so-called “connection” implies, as not all male connections were necessarily husbands or sexual partners—some were listed as being “married” to their connections, while others were not. Some may have been friends, and perhaps employers. Some women had former connections dating back to the early 1800s, when Mauritius (Île de France) was still under French rule.

The average age of the women listed is between forty and forty-five years, though there

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<sup>96</sup> Minute no. 81, 31 October 1832, RA450, NAM.

are women listed as old as eighty-one, and as young as eighteen.<sup>97</sup> Some worked as washerwomen, seamstresses, domestics, field labourers, and simply “labourers.” The list also recorded to whom each woman was connected: always a man, sometimes a fellow “government black,” sometimes a slave, a soldier, or a free person. Some partners were living, but many were deceased. Ninety of the women were connected to a “government black,” forty-five to “prize negroes,”<sup>98</sup> and thirty-nine to free persons; the remaining 119 were unconnected.<sup>99</sup> The majority of male partners who were “government blacks” were employed by the military or the Civil Engineer Department in Mauritius. The document also recorded whether the woman in question was “disposed to marry” or not. Only two were married, the majority being listed as “disposed to marry.” It is unclear whether this implied they were inclined to marry the men listed as their connections, they were simply seeking to be married in a general sense, or the government wished for them to find husbands.<sup>100</sup>

It is also unclear how this information was compiled—were these women asked, orally, about their pregnancies, birth histories, and past relationships? The information is so highly detailed in some cases that it seems likely many of these women reported facts directly to officials, particularly the women who came from other islands, who had multiple children and partners, and who were quite young or quite old. For example, one woman, Laïre, aged eighty, had married a man in Île Bourbon in 1766, who had since died. It seems unlikely that the British

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<sup>97</sup> It was relatively uncommon for enslaved women to reach an elderly age in Mauritius. For a detailed examination of slave mortality in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Mauritius, see Sadasivam Jaganada Reddi and Sheetal Sheena Sookrajowa, “Slavery, Health, and Epidemics in Mauritius, 1721–1860” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity*, ed. Steven Ratuva (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019).

<sup>98</sup> “Prize negroes,” as defined at more length later in this chapter, were enslaved persons captured from slaving vessels in the western Indian Ocean by British anti-slavery naval patrols, and deposited at various port towns, where they were indentured on fourteen-year contracts to the colonial government, or to private residents and estates. The Royal Navy men involved often received cash “prizes” for each enslaved person they “rescued” in this manner.

<sup>99</sup> It is unclear here what the distinction is between government black and “prize negro.”

<sup>100</sup> “No. 20: Returns of Female Slaves belonging to Government at Mauritius, and their connections,” 3 June 1828, Port Louis, CEE Appendices, CO 167/123, NA.

colonial government had in its possession documentation from that era about this enslaved woman. How did she become a “government slave” at such an elderly age? Where did the colonial government acquire information about her husband, who had died on a different island? Many questions remain unanswered.

This list does demonstrate that many recaptive women were reproductively active. It recorded the number and sex of their children, whether the children were alive or deceased,<sup>101</sup> and whether the children were born before or after the woman’s acquaintance to their present male connection. Again, while it is unclear how the information in this document was used by the colonial government, the list does give important and unique insight into the reproductive lives of these women. In fact, Marina Carter indicates that in 1819 a change was made to apprentice agreements to include the care and provisioning of children born to apprenticed women.<sup>102</sup> Was this new, added burden to the government coffers under investigation? For example, Jeanneton Gaidame, aged seventy-two, gave birth to fourteen children, of whom only five were still living in 1828 (three girls and two boys)—and she had no current or former connections or partners recorded. Thus, we can presume that she and her five living children were supported by the colonial government. Another woman, Perrine de Madeleine, fifty, connected to an enslaved carpenter named Bernard, gave birth to ten children, of whom six were living. She also had one (deceased) girl prior to her connection with Bernard. In this case, it seems highly unlikely that Bernard, as a slave, could have financially supported Madeleine and her six children. In another case, a washerwoman named Marie had two boys with a free man named Guillaume Dimbas, though both children had died by 1828. Prior to being with

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<sup>101</sup> Enslaved infant and child mortality were the result of a lack of health facilities, dietary deficiencies, hurricanes, and epidemics. Of course, mortality rates among enslaved adults was impacted by the same factors. See Reddi and Sookrajowa, “Slavery, Health, and Epidemics,” 1753.

<sup>102</sup> Carter, *The Last Slaves*, 58.

Guillaume, however, Marie had six other children, five of whom were still living. There are dozens of similar accounts to these. Many women gave birth to at least one child, and many had multiple living children in 1828 (though an overwhelming number of their children were deceased, as well). These women were all employed as recaptives, in varying occupations, and many had children who needed government support.

Furthermore, the document indicates that captive women were sometimes coupling with men, both bonded and free, despite being wards of the government. Some of the women thirty years of age and older may have witnessed the British occupation of Mauritius in 1810, which begs the question, how did they come to be listed as “government slaves” under British rule? Though some are listed as previously having connections in Île Bourbon, or as having been “brought over” to Mauritius, the British authorities might have confiscated some of these women from former slaveholders, and the Royal Navy may have seized others from slaving vessels. A few of the women were married in the 1770s and 1780s to husbands who had died before 1828. However, some women, like “Zemire Creole,” a forty-year-old washerwoman, had no past or present connections, nor children, and was not disposed to marry anyone at all. Who was Zemire? Was she very recently “rescued” from the slave trade, and brought to Mauritius? Did she perhaps refuse to identify personal information about herself to those collecting this data? The document, while fascinating, again leaves many questions unanswered.

This list of women government slaves also suggests that, not only were many of the women in question actively having children, but that this was information the colonial state wished to record. On the subject of freedom, it is difficult to ascertain whether the children listed were ever considered legally free by colonial authorities—presumably they were not. What’s more, it is unclear whether each of the children listed lived (or had lived, if marked as deceased)

in Mauritius; it is very likely that some children were born elsewhere, like the Seychelles or Île Bourbon, before their mothers were transported to Mauritius.

The document also reflects the colonial state's preoccupation with the costs associated with keeping government slaves. Two columns in the document list the occupations of all the male connections, and whether the men derived their income from the government, military, or a "master," or through their own independent work—the implication perhaps being that recaptive women could ideally be "maintained" by marrying income-earning male connections, rather than remaining a burden on government coffers. It seems likely that the women were encouraged to marry their connections.

Similarly, colonial authorities collected information about the children of "prize negroes" and government slaves.<sup>103</sup> In 1827, officials at the Custom House in Mauritius reported that any person holding a government slave

will maintain and provide for any child or children that may be borne during the term of apprenticeship until the expiration of such term, and will report to the collector of

Customs for the time being, [the] child born, within one month of its birth, specifying the mother's name, trade, and the date of the indenture, as also the name given or to be given to such 'child.'<sup>104</sup>

Boys and girls (defined in this project as being fifteen years of age and younger), like their adult counterparts, were rented or "apprenticed" out to various individuals and institutions in Mauritius. In 1832, the Matricule Office reported that seventy-three boys and thirty-four girls had been apprenticed out that year (to precisely whom remains unclear) "for the purpose of

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<sup>103</sup> This would include children under 15-years-old who were "rescued" by the British Royal Navy from slaving vessels, as well as those who were born to recaptive parents in Mauritius.

<sup>104</sup> "Prize Negroes and Free Blacks," 7 April 1827, f. B, no. 7, *Returns and Documents Relating to Prize Negroes*, CO415/11, NA.

learning a trade and also being taught reading and thus prayers.” At the age of fourteen, the children were returned to the Matriculate where they were again hired out or apprenticed to a trade.<sup>105</sup> The Royal College likewise rented out some children as domestics.<sup>106</sup>

The contract labour system for recaptive children was similar to that for adults, and issues related to freedom and emancipation also arose for child captives. On occasion, children were formally emancipated by the government to be handed over (“apprenticed”) to a private individual; twenty-six boys were emancipated in this manner in August 1832.<sup>107</sup> There were also cases of recaptive children being apprenticed out by the Matricule, only in subsequent censuses to be illegally registered as the enslaved property of their employers. This was particularly common in cases for children whose mothers had died when they were infants. The Custom House informed the Governor in May 1827 that the births of children of “prize negresses” were not being reported with regularity precisely for this reason. Whereas in 1825, forty-nine births had been recorded (with similar numbers for the prior years), only nine births were reported in 1826.<sup>108</sup> A copy of this letter was given the Commissioners of Eastern Enquiry, who were undoubtedly interested to learn that children of government slaves were being falsely enslaved as private property by Mauritian residents.

The line between free and unfree was indistinct in colonial British Mauritius. The two statuses were discursively linked, and chattel slaves and government slaves or captives experienced similar forms of ill-treatment in the island. There were also many cases of captive women attempting to claim their freedom via British colonial authorities, including the CEE and

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<sup>105</sup> Miscellaneous Returns, 1830–1832, IA42, NAM.

<sup>106</sup> Letter by the Proviseur du College Royal, “1828 – Rector of Royal College – Statement of Slaves employed at the Royal College,” 1 December 1828, Port Louis, RA 32, NAM.

<sup>107</sup> Letter from Richard Thomas, Protector of Slaves, to G.F. Dick, Chief Secretary of Government, 27 August 1832, Port Louis, f. IC21, NAM.

<sup>108</sup> Letter to Governor Colville from the Custom’s House, 5 May 1827, Port Louis, C415/2 – CEE Public Correspondence, NA.

the Protector of Slaves, Richard Thomas, who received many such claims from government slaves. In July 1829, the Protector of Slaves reported to the Chief Secretary to Government that a woman named Nina had lodged with him a complaint against her slaveholder. During his investigation, the Protector discovered that Nina was in fact a “Government slave, and that she [had] been fraudulently sold by one or other of the persons in whose service she was placed.”<sup>109</sup> Some inhabitants of the island were illegally selling recaptives, and reintegrating them into chattel slavery. Though Nina was able to report this offence to the Protector of Slaves, we can assume that dozens of other recaptives, especially children, were quietly and illegally transitioned into chattel slavery without the action being reported.

Forms of corporal punishment and physical violence were also perpetrated against recaptives. Vijaya Teelock even argues that some “government blacks” experienced more ill-treatment, in the form of harsh living conditions and physical violence, than some enslaved persons.<sup>110</sup> A government apprentice named Sophie presented herself to the Police Department on 25 January 1830 with “a chain round her neck and complaining of ill treatment.” She was subsequently sent to hospital, and the Chief of Police asked that the colonial government defray the hospital charges.<sup>111</sup> In effect, this dual form of “recaptivity” and “apprenticeship” did not permit freedom.

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<sup>109</sup> Letter by Richard Thomas, Protector of Slaves, to G.F. Barry, Chief Secretary of Government, 27 July 1829, Port Louis, IC 21, NAM.

<sup>110</sup> Teelock, *Bitter Sugar*, 67.

<sup>111</sup> Letter from Chief Commissary of Police to G.F. Barry, Chief Secretary to Government, 1 February 1830, Port Louis, RA 430, NAM.



## *Conclusion*

In early British Mauritius, many legally and illegally bonded individuals sought their freedom from slavery and indenture contracts. The Commission of Eastern Enquiry, a body established to investigate colonial governance in Mauritius and the slave trade, highlighted many legal inconsistencies related to emancipation. It has been my objective in this chapter to amplify the experiences—and sometimes, voices—of enslaved women in Mauritius, as they fought for freedom for themselves and their families. As illustrated by the practice of recaptivity and government indenture, freedom was contested and difficult to obtain in the island. While the colonial government was not necessarily keen to pay to maintain Mauritius's population of government slaves, it was equally unwilling to facilitate their emancipation. Both chattel and government slaves experienced coercion and violence. As the next chapter demonstrates, this paved the way for the CEE's recommendation that a Protector of Slaves be appointed to the island less to liberate slaves than ameliorate the condition of slavery.

### Chapter 3

#### Dubious Protection: Mauritian Slavery Amelioration Measures and Resistance<sup>1</sup>

A complaint was brought before the Assistant Protector of Slaves for Grand Port on 4 January 1831 related to the ill-treatment of Elvina, a sixteen-year-old domestic belonging to the Salabert family in Mahébourg (see Figure 1). Elvina had been held with chains in a granary for nearly two years—from the age of fourteen—during which time she was sometimes left in a “complete state of nudity.”<sup>2</sup> The Salaberts also kept Elvina in irons of a “weight and description prohibited by law” for enslaved women and girls in the colony.

This complaint aroused such interest that the Protector of Slaves for Mauritius, Richard Thomas, took over the case from his assistant in Grand Port. During the investigation, Thomas examined a large number of witnesses, one of whom was Elvina’s mother, Nancy, who was recorded as crying heavily throughout her testimony. Nancy claimed that she was allowed to see her daughter very infrequently, and that whenever she visited, she found Elvina naked or wearing only a shift (smock or undergarment), and fastened by a chain in the granary. On occasions when Nancy brought clothing for her daughter, the Salaberts immediately removed it. When Nancy gave her daughter earrings, Mrs. Salabert “broke them whilst in her ears.” Thomas also interrogated Elvina’s father, a free man by the name of Laviolette, who declared he had little to add, except that he had been told of Mr. Salabert’s severity, and could confirm that his child had been confined in chains for years. Laviolette’s testimony was in turn corroborated by two enslaved men, Pascal and Jean Pierre, who presumably lived with or near the Salaberts. They asserted that Elvina was enchained to prevent her from visiting a nearby military barracks,

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this chapter have been previously published in Tyler Yank, “Slave Protection and Resistance in Colonial Mauritius, 1829-1830,” in eds. Jeff Fynn-Paul and Damian Alan Pargas, *Slaving Zones: Cultural Identities, Ideologies, and Institutions in the Evolution of Global Slavery*, (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 224–46.

<sup>2</sup> Case of Elvina, 4 January 1831, Protector of Slaves Reports (Jan–July 1831), CO 172/28, The National Archives, Kew (hereafter NA).

implying that she frequently solicited soldiers there. Pascal and Jean Pierre also claimed that her clothing had been taken to “shame her from escaping.”<sup>3</sup>

Thomas summoned the Salaberts to the Assistant Protector’s Office in Grand Port to justify their conduct. Mr. Salabert admitted to both confining Elvina in chains and taking her clothing. He stated that ordinary punishments for “refractory slaves” had been insufficient to restrain Elvina from “her dissolute habits,” and she had been fastened with chains in the granary for a total of nine months since 1829. Depriving her of clothing, he added, was intended to “shame her” so that she would not try to escape again. Despite confining her in this manner, Salabert admitted that Elvina still often managed to escape sometimes by jumping from the granary window.<sup>4</sup> Holding an enslaved women and girls with chains was illegal in Mauritius in 1829, and as a result, Thomas referred the Salabert’s case to the Attorney General of Mauritius for further investigation and prosecution.<sup>5</sup>

Elvina’s complaint was one among dozens brought before a slave protection official in Mauritius in 1831. In fact, in the first year that the Protector of Slaves and his agents operated on the island, from March 1829 to March 1830, 182 separate complaints lodged by over 300 bondspeople were brought before him in Port Louis, or before one of his assistant protectors located in the island’s nine districts (see Figure 1). Between 1829 and 1833, the Protector of Slaves in Mauritius and his agents heard hundreds more. Complaints of ill-treatment by the enslaved were recorded prior to 1829 by local police forces, and nominally handled by the

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<sup>3</sup> Case of Elvina, 4 January 1831.

<sup>4</sup> Case of Elvina, 4 January 1831.

<sup>5</sup> This ruling was in accordance with *Ordinance no. 51*, 26 September 1829. This Ordinance was actually repealed by the colonial government in London in February 1831. See Copy of a Despatch from Viscount Goderich to Lieutenant General Sir Charles Colville, Governor of Mauritius, 28 February 1831, in *Papers presented to Parliament by his Majesty’s Command, in Explanation of the Measures adopted by his Majesty’s Government for the Melioration of the Condition of the Slave Population in his Majesty’s Possessions in the West Indies, on the Continent of South America, the Cape of Good Hope, and at the Mauritius*, House of Commons, 10 March 1831, Parliamentary Papers Online, vol. 16.

attorney general. Unfortunately, existing colonial police records for this period are in very poor condition, and there is little evidence that anything concrete was ever done for bondspersons who registered complaints with these authorities.<sup>6</sup>

Mauritius was a small island (2,040km<sup>2</sup>) with a large servile population, and most landowners possessed enslaved labourers.<sup>7</sup> In 1807, the ratio of freemen to slaves has been estimated at 1 to 5.3.<sup>8</sup> Following the Commission of Eastern Enquiry's (1826–28) recommendations, a Protector of Slaves was introduced to the island in 1829 to implement and oversee a newly devised protection office where the enslaved could register formal grievances. The Protector also oversaw many changes in law intended to improve living and working conditions for enslaved labourers. Richard Morris Thomas, the first Protector of Slaves, arrived in Port Louis in mid-March 1829, just as the monsoon season was coming to a close.<sup>9</sup> Thomas and his district assistants were meant to act as “the eyes and ears of the imperial government, enforcing the law and restraining the arbitrary authority of local colonists,” who in this case comprised the French-Mauritian landowners and slaveholders.<sup>10</sup>

The decade leading up to formal emancipation in 1835 was turbulent for both French-Mauritian slaveholders and British colonial agents in Mauritius. The former sought to maintain

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<sup>6</sup> As the Commission of Eastern Enquiry unearthed in 1826–28, a vast array of identity papers, birth certificates, slavery registration documents, and customs papers were regularly destroyed, falsified, or vanished (see Chapter Two of this dissertation). It is possible that complaints reported by enslaved persons to the Police were treated in an equal manner.

<sup>7</sup> The enslaved populations on Caribbean islands were higher. Barbados, which is almost five times smaller than Mauritius, had a slave population of 69,369 in 1809. Jamaica, which is roughly five times larger than Mauritius, had a slave population of 300,000 in 1800. See David Watts, *The West Indies: Patterns of Development, Culture and Environmental Change since 1492* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 311. In the 1810s and 1820s, the majority of slaveholders in Mauritius were of French descent. Free people of colour and some inhabitants of British origin also held enslaved property.

<sup>8</sup> Sadasivam Jaganada Reddi and Sheetal Sheena Sookrajowa, “Slavery, Health, and Epidemics in Mauritius, 1721–1860” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity*, ed. Steven Ratuva (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019), 1751.

<sup>9</sup> Protectors were also introduced in Trinidad in 1824, and later in Barbados, Jamaica and the Cape Colony. See Robert Luster, *The Amelioration of the Slaves in the British Empire, 1790-1833* (New York: P. Lang, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Quarrier Spence, “Ameliorating Empire: Slavery and Protection in the British Colonies, 1783-1865,” (PhD Thesis, Harvard University, 2014), 35.

firm control of land, labourers, and colonial governance, while strongly resisting the new intrusive laws and practices, as they saw them, introduced by British administration. Many French-Mauritian residents also considered that “ameliorating” the lives of the bonded population undermined their authority as slaveholders, and weakened their control of the unfree labour force. At the same time, the new British colonial agents were concerned, like their counterparts in the British Caribbean, that any sweeping economic change or new “radical” concepts related to anti-slavery advocacy and emancipation would lead to anger and even rebellion among planters and agriculturalists in Mauritius who relied on this unfree labour.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, during his first year on the island, Thomas reported that angry French-Mauritians berated him constantly, and local French authorities frequently tried to hinder his work.<sup>12</sup> LMS missionary Reverend Jean Le Brun, whose activities are the subject of chapter four of this study, made many similar reports. These cross-imperial tensions impacted several British colonial projects in Mauritius throughout the 1820s and 1830s, particularly those that intervened in slaveholding and slave-trading.

This chapter explores the Protector of Slave’s activities during his first year in the role, from March 1829 to March 1830, as well as significant changes to slaveholding laws and practices as they related to new amelioration measures. The chapter also questions the motives for some enslaved women to make complaints of ill-treatment to Thomas and his assistants, and studies the handling and outcome of cases in 1829 and 1830. Most slaves made justifiable complaints, but there is evidence suggesting that some chose to place false complaints—prompting one to ask *why* this might be the case, and to consider the roles that motherhood and

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<sup>11</sup> Quarrier Spence, “Ameliorating Empire,” 8. French-Mauritian planters did briefly revolt in 1832 on the matter of British laws related to slaveholding. See Richard Gott, “White Planter Rebellions and Buddhist Resistance in the East,” in *Britain’s Empire: Resistance, Repression and Revolt* (London: Verso, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> *Report of the Protector and Guardian of Slaves, to His Excellency Sir Charles Colville, G.C.B. Governor and Commander-in-Chief, from 20 March to 24 June 1829, Part VI – Mauritius*, Protectors of Slaves reports, 1829, Parliamentary Papers Online (hereafter PP), (262).

resistance played in the historical narrative of colonial slave protection.

The evidence also suggests that while Thomas intended to reduce the harm inflicted upon enslaved peoples, the Protector of Slaves ultimately perpetuated the culture of slaveholding violence in Mauritius, particularly in cases of defiance or resistance by an unfree complainant. Additionally, bondswomen appear to have sometimes used the Protector of Slave's services for different ends than their male peers. In effect, the slave protection records shed light on the ways that the enslaved responded to conflict with slaveholders in Mauritian society in the years leading up to formal emancipation.

### *Amelioration, Empire, & Legal Pluralism*

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the anti-slavery sentiment and campaigning that was widespread in the Atlantic world slowly extended to Britain's Indian Ocean colonies.<sup>13</sup> When the Commission of Eastern Enquiry (CEE)—one of several imperial commissions tasked with probing the activities of British colonial governments—visited Mauritius from 1826 to 1828, one element of their mandate was to investigate slaveholding and other colonial “embarrassments” occurring on the island.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the CEE recommended that numerous slavery amelioration measures be introduced and applied. Advocates of the “gradual amelioration” of slavery believed that giving bondspeople increased legal rights and a Christian education were important first steps for black imperial subjects before emancipation was

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<sup>13</sup> This process is explained in more detail in Part One of Chapter Four of this dissertation.

<sup>14</sup> “Copy of the Instructions given to the Commissioners of Enquiry proceeding to the Cape of Good Hope, Mauritius, and Ceylon, date Downing-Street, 13 January 1823,” 1826, PP (332).

introduced with the formal Emancipation Act (1833), which came into effect in Mauritius in February 1835.<sup>15</sup> It was generally feared that ex-slaves would turn violently on their former owners after emancipation, and according to many proponents of abolition, elementary instruction and improved work conditions could lead to a more peaceful transition to freedom.

During the French Revolutionary Wars (1792–1802) and Napoleonic Wars (1803–15), Britain acquired the Cape Colony, Ceylon, Dutch Guiana, Mauritius, Trinidad, Tobago, and St. Lucia. In many of these territories, British lawmakers began to experiment with amelioration to improve the treatment of bondspeople by cruel slaveholders. At the turn of the nineteenth century in the Atlantic world, Trinidad became “a model for the project to ameliorate slavery,” where administrators introduced new legislation related to protection, slave registration, and manumission. Some of these laws were then adopted across the British empire. At the suggestion of the CEE, new amelioration measures were introduced to Mauritius in the mid-1820s.<sup>16</sup>

The first British governor of Mauritius, Robert Townsend Farquhar (g. 1811–17; 1820–23), assumed the task of reconciling the wants and needs of French-Mauritian landowners with those of British colonial agents and anti-slavery advocates. Farquhar infamously asked the Secretary of State for the Colonies if Mauritius could be exempt from the 1807 ban on slave-trading. He did so in an attempt to pacify French-Mauritian plantation owners, and so as to not disrupt the Mauritian sugar export market, which was newly thriving due to steady declines in the Caribbean sugar trade. His request was firmly denied, setting the stage for many years of tension and animosity between French-Mauritian and British authorities.<sup>17</sup>

By 1820, the legal framework for slaveholding on the island had become a complex mix of British and French colonial laws. The *Code Noir* (Black Code) (1723), a decree policing

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<sup>15</sup> This subject is examined at length in Chapter Four of this dissertation.

<sup>16</sup> Quarrier Spence, “Ameliorating Empire,” 4.

<sup>17</sup> Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen*, 14.

slavery in the French empire,<sup>18</sup> remained the primary legal code that governed both slaveholders and bondspeople. Numerous French East Indies Company regulations, royal laws, and colonial ordinances after 1723 supplemented and modified the French legal apparatus. New laws were gradually introduced by the British colonial government after 1815, and several regulated slaveholding. Some of these ordinances diverged from the *Code Noir*, while others nuanced it, including ordinances regulating corporal punishment, the use of chains and irons, and the treatment of enslaved women and children, as explored below.

Most notably, the *Ordinance of his Excellency the Governor in Council, No. 43*, set in place in 1829, introduced a Protector of Slaves to Mauritius, and detailed how this individual would operate and the laws he was charged with enforcing.<sup>19</sup> In theory, when a slaveholder broke a law, the Protector of Slaves would investigate the case, and either dismiss it or send it onwards to the Mauritian attorney general. Steep fines were the usual consequence for a person charged with breaking an ordinance and conducting illegal activity related to slaveholding. It is unclear how much French-Mauritian slaveholders knew of the various ordinances governing the treatment of their unfree labourers. As the records for 1829–30 demonstrate, when the Protector of Slaves called upon slaveholders to give testimony, many denied knowledge of, for example, the laws prohibiting the corporal punishment of enslaved women.<sup>20</sup>

The central judicial authority on the island was the attorney general, a position normally occupied by a French-Mauritian landowner. This figure constituted another site of tension for British authorities. In correspondence to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the

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<sup>18</sup> *Le Code Noir*, or The Black Code, was a decree passed by King Louis XIV (France) in 1685, and amended in 1723. Mauritius would have been operating under the 1723 amended version of the decree when the island became a British crown colony in 1815.

<sup>19</sup> “No. 43 - Ordinance in Council for Improving the condition of the slave Population in Mauritius,” 12 June 1829, PP (338). This ordinance was officially reported to the Crown in February 1829, just prior to the arrival of the first Protector of Slaves to Mauritius.

<sup>20</sup> New laws such as this were typically publicized in the *Mauritius Government Gazette*, which was published in both French and English in Mauritius, and distributed among elites in the colony.



Commissioners of Eastern Enquiry remarked in 1828, during their two-year visit to Mauritius, that the attorney general in the island tended too often to rule against the enslaved, and to order their punishment.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the attorney general was generally more interested in keeping the loyalty of his peers—other French-Mauritian landowners—than he was in helping a British authority to prosecute them. Thomas also reported in his correspondence to the Crown that the attorney general was very uncommunicative and uncooperative, and he expressed frustration with how slowly French authorities and legal bodies worked in the island.<sup>22</sup> Thomas also stated that the attorney general rarely answered or returned his letters, and remained frustratingly silent on many matters.<sup>23</sup> Other French administrative authorities on the island were equally antagonistic. For example, important trials would sometimes be called with less than 24-hours' notice, so that Thomas would not have time to prepare or attend.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in March 1829, Thomas' agent in the Pamplemousses district remarked that nearly all the inhabitants there refused to receive him or use his services.<sup>25</sup> Later that year, Thomas reported to the Chief Secretary of Government that even slaveholders summoned by the Chief of Police, in a complaint investigation, would sometimes refuse the summons.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the British slaveholding laws introduced in the late 1820s, elements of the *Code Noir* were still being upheld, and were crucial to the Protector's work. As per the *Code Noir*, testimony and witness accounts by the enslaved were considered inferior to those of free individuals.<sup>27</sup> The words of slaveholders, estate managers, and field overseers were considered

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<sup>21</sup> "No. 2a: To the Right Hon. William Huskisson, Mauritius, 19 May 1828, signed by Colebrooke & Blair," 1829, PP (338).

<sup>22</sup> *Report of the Protector and Guardian of Slaves*, 1829, PP (262).

<sup>23</sup> *Report of the Protector and Guardian of Slaves*, 1829, PP (262).

<sup>24</sup> *Report of the Protector and Guardian of Slaves*, 1829, PP (262).

<sup>25</sup> Richard Thomas to Charles Colville, 31 March 1829, Mauritius, IC 21, NAM.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Thomas to Chief Secretary of Government, 25 August 1829, Mauritius, IC 21, NAM.

<sup>27</sup> *Ordonnance, ou, Code noir: lettres patentes en forme d'Édit concernant les esclaves des Isles de Bourbon et de France, décembre 1723*, NAM.

distinctly superior, and this discrepancy shaped the outcome of many complaint cases. For example, unfree complainants with bodily evidence of mistreatment were often dismissed if their slaveholders refuted their claims. If a free, white witness (such as a neighbour or friend) corroborated a slaveholder's story, there was an even higher likelihood that a bonded person's complaint would be dismissed as false.

In a typical complaint investigation, other unfree individuals from the same estate or domestic dwelling as the complainant were normally questioned as witnesses, and the record generally demonstrates that an enslaved person was far more likely to corroborate a slaveholder's story than that of the peer who placed the complaint. Thomas expressed frustration with this trend in his September 1829 correspondence to the Crown. In one letter, he gave the example of an enslaved girl with visible marks of punishment on her body.<sup>28</sup> The child's owner, in his defending argument, refuted the accusation that the child had received corporal punishment, and had two of his unfree labourers also refute the claims. Thomas was forced to dismiss the case. The archival record demonstrates that this outcome was very common, and many legitimate complaints were likely dismissed on similar grounds throughout the late 1820s and early 1830s.

### *Punishment and Protection*

New laws that revised sections of the *Code Noir* were periodically decreed prior to the Protector's arrival in 1829, including measures to regulate corporal punishment. Crucially, no laws altogether prohibited violence against bondspeople, and corporal punishment continued to

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<sup>28</sup> *Report of the Protector and Guardian of Slaves*, 1829, PP (262).

be widely inflicted despite new legislation to the contrary. In December 1826, Governor of Mauritius Lowry Cole (g. 1823–28) wrote to the Crown about “establishing the weight of the chains, fetters and iron rings which the inhabitants are allowed to put upon their slaves by way of punishment.”<sup>29</sup> The *Code Noir* enabled slaveholders to use chains without specifying their weight. Governor Cole revised the law so that the weight of the chains could not “with the collars thereunto fixed, exceed nine pounds for two male slaves of fifteen years of age and upwards ... nor six pounds for a single slave.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, he ruled that the weight of chains “shall not exceed five pounds for [girls and boys] under the age of fifteen years, nor three pounds when the chains shall be borne by such persons singly.”<sup>31</sup> In his first year as the Protector of Slaves, Thomas closely adhered to this ordinance in his rulings.<sup>32</sup> He frequently had chains and irons weighed at his office, and if they were above the permitted weight, the case was referred to the attorney general.

In June 1828, an officer at the Port Louis police station compiled a detailed list of the irons commonly used by Mauritian inhabitants to confine their bondpeople.<sup>33</sup> This list corresponded to an assortment of chains and fetters that had been collected at the police station since roughly 1824. Prior to the introduction of a Protector of Slaves office in the island, an enslaved person wishing to make a grievance about their prolonged confinement in chains or irons would present themselves to the police or a regional civil commissary official. The list indicates that, prior to 1829, unfree men and women frequently went to the police to register a complaint while *still wearing* iron collars connected to chains, sometimes with spikes and hooks

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<sup>29</sup> *Report of the Protector and Guardian of Slaves*, 1829, PP (262).

<sup>30</sup> *Report of the Protector and Guardian of Slaves*, 1829, PP (262).

<sup>31</sup> *Report of the Protector and Guardian of Slaves*, 1829, PP (262).

<sup>32</sup> Thomas nicknamed this particular law the “Chains Ordinance,” due to how often he referred to it in his own records and correspondence.

<sup>33</sup> “Descriptive list of irons used by the inhabitants of Mauritius in confining or punishing their slaves,” 25 June 1828, Port Louis, CO 167/142, NA.

included. The police would typically just cut off the irons or chains, and send the bonded person back to their home or estate.

George Murray, Secretary of State for the Colonies, wrote to Governor of Mauritius Charles Colville (g. 1828–34) in May 1829 to remind him that the practice of placing bondspeople in chains had been prohibited in the West Indies for some years. In his letter, Murray asked Colville to immediately enact “a law for the total and immediate prohibition of the use of chains, collars, fetters, and other instruments of the same or similar description.”<sup>34</sup> Yet, corporal punishment continued to be widely used to control the enslaved population, despite the changing laws. The Protector’s reports give compelling evidence that rates of corporal punishment did not slow or decline with his arrival. Until 1835, complainants were still primarily reporting their own or their children’s physical mistreatment to protection officials.

Why were irons and fetters, in particular, being so widely applied? One explanation relates to the high rates of marronage (flight) among the bonded population in the 1820s. Slaveholders would commonly use chains and other devices to limit an enslaved person’s mobility if he or she had marooned in the past, or seemed likely to run away again. As explored at more length below, data collected from the first twelve months of Thomas’ records reveal that forty-four per cent of complaints involved a reported case of marronage.<sup>35</sup> Complaints about the misuse of chains or stocks as illegal forms of punishment were also very common. In addition, Article 18 of *Ordinance no. 43* (1829) stated that it was illegal to punish an enslaved woman or girl with a whip or other instrument. Instead, the court or the Protector of Slaves was expected to

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<sup>34</sup> “No. 20 – Ordinance of His Excellency the Governor in Council,” 24 December 1826, PP (333).

<sup>35</sup> This includes both statements by the enslaved (in which they admitted to marronage) and statements by slaveholders (in which they accused an enslaved person of marronage).

determine the appropriate manner of punishment for a bonded woman or girl.<sup>36</sup> As discussed in the next section, these punishments regularly included whipping, but alternative punishments for women also included solitary confinement or prolonged containment in the stocks.

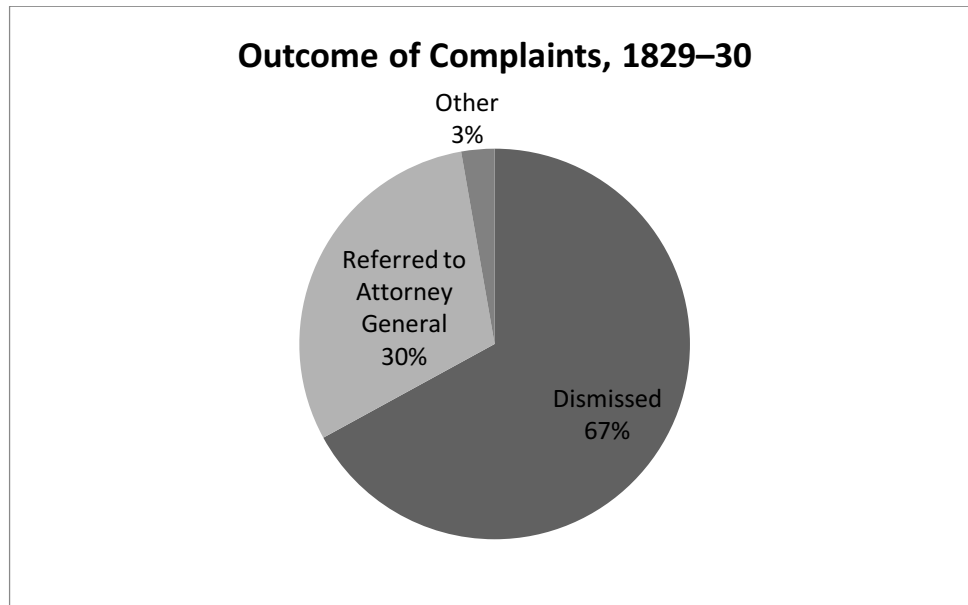
One further law introduced in 1829 was the necessity for slaveholders to keep a Punishment Record Book.<sup>37</sup> Every “proprietor, manager, overseer, or other person having the direction or chief authority of any plantation or establishment in the colony, and charged with the government and discipline of slaves” was bound by law to record any punishment given to an enslaved woman, and any punishment beyond nine lashes given to an enslaved man.<sup>38</sup> The manner of the offence, the time and place it was committed, and the time and place where the punishment was inflicted needed to be recorded. When a bondsperson presented themselves to Thomas to complain of, for example, being beaten, Thomas would typically ask the slaveholder in question to produce their punishment record book to verify if the claim was true. However, these new requirements were imperfect—many slaveholders and estate overseers claimed they did not know they were supposed to keep such a book, and others simply refused to do so. For example, between 1829 and 1830, Thomas encountered at least eight cases where a slaveholder did not keep or properly use a punishment record book. It seems likely false entries were sometimes recorded, as well.

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<sup>36</sup> “No. 43 - Ordinance in Council for Improving the condition of the slave Population in Mauritius,” Article XIII, 12 June 1829, PP (338).

<sup>37</sup> “No. 43 - Ordinance in Council for Improving the condition of the slave Population in Mauritius,” Article XV.

<sup>38</sup> “No. 43 - Ordinance in Council for Improving the condition of the slave Population in Mauritius,” Article XV.



*Figure 4: Outcome of Complaints, between March 1829 and March 1830.<sup>39</sup>*

It is important to note that the Protector of Slaves had the authority to punish enslaved complainants as well, particularly those whom he deemed to be lying or complaining under false pretenses. As Figure 4 highlights, from March 1829 to March 1830, 122 complaints (or sixty-seven per cent of all the complaints from that period) were dismissed; in other words, in well over half of the cases, complainants were perceived to be wrong, misinformed, or dishonest. If Thomas believed an enslaved person to be lying, or if witness testimony pointed to the possibility of a false complaint, he would usually sentence the complainant to receive between fifteen and twenty-five lashes, often in the presence of other unfree inhabitants of the same estate or domestic dwelling. Even though many complainants arrived at a protection office bearing marks of bodily injury upon their backs and shoulders, these cases were usually dismissed if the slaveholder denied their claims. If witnesses were brought forward who also denied the

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<sup>39</sup> These figures were calculated by the author based on the complaints recorded between March 1829 and March 1830, Protector of Slaves Report, Port Louis, CO 172/27, NA.

complainants version of events, as commonly occurred, there was an even higher likelihood that the complainant would be accused of lying, and sentenced to some form of corporal punishment. Thus, the practice of inflicting physical violence upon an enslaved person continued alongside and despite slave “protection” measures, and opened up new avenues for the corporal punishment and abuse of the enslaved.

### *Women, Motherhood, and Violence*

The complaint records also shed light on the culture of violence faced by enslaved women and children, as well as their responses to it. The records suggest that bondspeople sometimes used the protection offices for ends *other* than complaining of mistreatment. Sometimes they sought information about family members, and women, in particular, frequently visited the protection offices to complain that their child was being mistreated, sometimes with the child accompanying them.

As noted above, corporal punishment for enslaved women in British territories was banned under *Ordinance no. 43*, Article 12, issued in June 1829.<sup>40</sup> Women were not to be punished with a whip, cane, or similar instrument. Rather, solitary confinement, with or without additional labour, and the use of stocks, were deemed acceptable punishments.<sup>41</sup> Barbara Bush writes that similar corporal punishment practices were common throughout the 1820s in the

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<sup>40</sup> “No. 43 - Ordinance in Council for Improving the condition of the slave Population in Mauritius,” Article XII, 12 June 1829, PP (338).

<sup>41</sup> These revisions to what constituted legal slave punishments were applied throughout the British slaveholding territories.

British Caribbean.<sup>42</sup> Governor Colville reported in 1829 that some slaveholders in Mauritius also placed women in the *bar de justice*—an iron bar eight to ten feet long, to which were attached iron ankle rings—in a sitting or recumbent position so that they could continue to sew or perform other small work tasks while in confinement. Thomas eventually recommended the abolition of this device.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, the Protector of Slaves would not punish a woman complainant for lying in the same manner that he would punish a man. Instead, he would sentence enslaved women to be placed in solitary confinement for as long as ten days, or over several consecutive Sundays. Social isolation, it seems, and in many cases isolation from one's child or children, was a popular alternative punishment for women in bondage.<sup>44</sup> For example, in April 1829, an enslaved woman named Mélanie complained that she was obliged to "leave home to seek for work" as a washerwoman, in order to bring her slaveholder four francs per day; if she did not, she was beaten.<sup>45</sup> Mélanie also stated that she was kept "in a constant state of anxiety respecting her daughter," who was absent from the estate. The slaveholder in question, a Mme. Descia, denied Mélanie's claims, and countered that Mélanie had absented herself for over fifteen days without permission. Descia also told the Protector that Mélanie's daughter was in the *bagne*, the prison and workhouse where the enslaved—often arrested as runaways—were taken and held. Mélanie did not openly exhibit any "signs of mistreatment," so the Protector dismissed the case and sentenced her to ten days of solitary confinement. In this case, it is possible that Mélanie was interested in learning the whereabouts of her daughter, which may have also motivated her to seek out the Protector's services. Mélanie's "constant state of anxiety" also points to the psychic

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<sup>42</sup> Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (Kingston: Heinemann Caribbean, 1990), 58.

<sup>43</sup> *Report of the Protector and Guardian of Slaves*, 1829, PP (262).

<sup>44</sup> Less commonly, Thomas also had the authority to sentence a woman to receive fewer than nine lashes. *Report of the Protector and Guardian of Slaves*, PP (262).

<sup>45</sup> Complaint by Mélanie, 10 April 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.



violence inflicted against the enslaved, and the detrimental impact this had on their emotional, mental and physical health.<sup>46</sup> In another case, a bondswoman named Jeanne brought a complaint against her slaveholder, Mme. Dupré, in late March 1829. Jeanne stated that she was beaten on two occasions, and that Dupré took away her only piece of property, a pig. Jeanne then fled with her infant to the police, who directed her to the assistant protector for the Plaines Wilhems district. After a short investigation, the assistant protector deemed Jeanne to be lying, and she was sentenced to seven days of solitary confinement, followed by hard labour. No mention is made of who cared for Jeanne's infant during this period.<sup>47</sup>

By 1829, it was also illegal for an enslaved parent and child (under fifteen years of age) to be sold to separate owners.<sup>48</sup> It seems that before this law was introduced, however, many enslaved children, particularly adolescents, lived separately from their parents. Aurélie, a 14-year-old girl living in Port Louis, complained that she was never allowed to visit her mother in the south of the island. When questioned by the Protector, her slaveholder argued that Aurélie *was* permitted to visit her mother, but that the girl would often stay away much longer than she had been given permission to.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Victorine, a 15-year-old girl living in Moka, complained that she was never allowed to see her mother in Port Louis, and that “an iron ring had been placed upon her ankle upwards of a year ago” so that she would not leave. In this case, Thomas established with the estate owner that Victorine should be allowed to see her mother twice a month. The estate owner was fined for having put an enslaved girl illegally in irons, and

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<sup>46</sup> For more on the topic of psychic violence in slavery, see Selamawit Terrefe, “Dissociative States: The Metaphysics of Blackness and the Psychic Afterlife of Slavery” (PhD Thesis, University of California, Irvine, 2017).

<sup>47</sup> Complaint by Jeanne, 20 March 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA; Thomas to Assistant Protector for Plaines Wilhelms, 24 March 1829, IC 24, NAM.

<sup>48</sup> “No. 43 - Ordinance in Council for Improving the condition of the slave Population in Mauritius,” Article XXIV, 12 June 1829, PP (338).

<sup>49</sup> Complaint by Aurélie, 10 April 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

the case was also referred to the attorney general.<sup>50</sup>

Commonly, slaveholders also accused enslaved women of being poor mothers as a means of delegitimizing their complaints to the Protector or the police. As highlighted in chapter one of this dissertation, white slaveholders cultivated prolific stereotypes of neglectful and dangerous black motherhood, and evidence from the Protector of Slaves reports reveals the extent to which white slaveholders routinely sought to interfere in black maternity and connections between mothers and children. For example, it was not unusual for an enslaved woman in Mauritius to be accused of both absenting herself from her children and of being a generally unfit mother. Such complaints included accusations of sexual promiscuity and, more often, drunkenness. Veuve Sturbel, a landowner and slaveholder in the district of Savanne, was the subject of nine separate complaints between 22 April 1829 and 2 March 1830.<sup>51</sup> Eight out of the nine complainants were women, sometimes accompanied by their children. Sturbel, who employed enslaved adults and children in sack making, was repeatedly accused of overworking her labourers and punishing both adults and children for not producing a certain quota of sacks each day. Christine, an enslaved Creole woman, reported that if the children under her supervision did not sew an adequate number of sacks daily, *she* (Christine) was punished for it.<sup>52</sup> Victorine and Anaïs, both employed by Sturbel, also complained on separate occasions that neither had time to care for their infant children due to the long workdays.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, Celestine stated that she was once heavily beaten while pregnant, and this had caused her to miscarry.<sup>54</sup> Julien, a thirteen-year-old boy owned by Sturbel, also visited the Protector twice. On the second occasion, Julien reported

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<sup>50</sup> Complaint by Victorine, 3 July 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>51</sup> This is the highest volume of complaints for a single estate in the 1829–30 complaint records.

<sup>52</sup> Complaint by Christine, 30 November 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>53</sup> Complaint by Victorine, 31 December 1829; and Complaint by Anaïs, 20 November 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>54</sup> Complaint by Celestine, 2 August 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

that he had been punished for making his first complaint several months earlier.<sup>55</sup> Most of the women complainants, too, reported that they were repeatedly flogged and otherwise beaten on the estate.<sup>56</sup>

Sturbel claimed, in her testimony to the Protector, that all of her enslaved workers were lying. She stated that the women were beaten by their husbands, and that they were “drunkards” who could not care for their children. Over the course of twelve months, Thomas forwarded Sturbel’s case to the attorney general on four separate occasions before he finally reported the increasingly dire situation to the Governor in August 1829.<sup>57</sup> These records do not indicate whether anything was actually done to improve the working lives of the women and children languishing under Sturbel’s control, or whether she ever faced consequences for her cruel actions. Given trends observed in the records related to the attorney general’s idleness and the limitations of the Protector’s role, it is likely that Sturbel never faced more than a heavy fine. Thus, the new slave protection offices and laws, in many cases, were not providing legal recourse or protection to the island’s most vulnerable groups: enslaved mothers and their children. In the first year of the Protector’s tenancy, roughly thirty-three per cent of individual complainants were female, sixty-five per cent of whom had their cases dismissed.<sup>58</sup>

Apart from the Sturbel case, many other enslaved children and pregnant women made complaints to the Protector. On 12 April 1829, a twenty-two-year-old bondswoman named Aglaé presented herself to the Protector in Port Louis to complain that she was beaten with a cane,

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<sup>55</sup> Complaint by Julien, 2 March 1830, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>56</sup> More broadly, it was not uncommon for slaveholders to mete out brutal mistreatment and punishment to enslaved women. Mary Prince describes the assault and murder of her fellow pregnant enslaved woman, Hetty, at the hands of their white male slaveholder, in Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997). These vicious practices were illogical, too, as they often resulted in the death of the pregnant enslaved woman and the child, which represented a double economic loss for the slaveholder.

<sup>57</sup> Richard Thomas to Colonel Barry, Chief Secretary of Government, 31 August 1829, IC 21, NAM.

<sup>58</sup> 33 per cent accounts for 58 individuals, and of this, 65 per cent, or 38 individuals, were dismissed. These figures were calculated by the author.

falsely accused of stealing, and forced to work on Sundays. The medical certificate accompanying this record indicates that Aglaé was four months pregnant at the time of her complaint, and that she had marks of corporal punishment on her lower back and shoulders, though they were reportedly “not inflicted with great severity.”<sup>59</sup> Aglaé’s slaveholder, Mme. Descia (the same woman as in Mélanie’s case above), accused Aglaé of constantly marooning. The Protector determined that since Aglaé’s beating occurred in early February of that same year, roughly one month before the enactment of *Ordinance no. 43*, he did not see fit to send the case to the attorney general. Aglaé was returned to Descia’s service, and the case was dismissed.

Similarly, Adèle, an enslaved woman living in Rivière du Rempart, complained that she was put in the *bar de justice* and beaten, all while pregnant. Adèle’s hair was also cut off as further punishment.<sup>60</sup> This form of punishment for women appears only twice in the records under examination here. The second instance occurred in March 1830 when twenty-two-year-old Marie Louise stated that she was forced to remove all her clothing and jewelry, and then had her hair cut off by her slaveholder.<sup>61</sup> Thomas dismissed this particular case, but reprimanded Marie Louise’s slaveholders for cutting her hair. There are also reports of pregnant women being put in the stocks, beaten, or flogged.

The frequency and commonplace nature of flogging and beating pregnant women and provoking miscarriages begs to question the motivations and mindsets of the white slaveholders, as well as questions of paternity. Shane White and Graham White have demonstrated that sex-specific physical punishments and abuses were often inflicted upon enslaved women by white

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<sup>59</sup> Complaint by Aglaé, 12 April 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>60</sup> Complaint by Adèle, 22 September 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>61</sup> Complaint by Marie Louise, 4 February 1830, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

female slaveholders in the early US.<sup>62</sup> Many female Mauritian slaveholders are cited throughout this chapter as perpetrators of violence against enslaved women. It is worth considering that the routine nature of floggings and beatings may have been sometimes directed at enslaved pregnant women on occasions when white female slaveholders suspected or knew their husbands to be the fathers of the unborn children. Unfortunately, the Protector of Slaves records offer no clues to this effect. Yet, they do demonstrate that multiple women complained to the Protector that they had miscarried after being subjected to some form of corporal punishment.

A case from 1833 demonstrates that this general disregard for enslaved motherhood persisted despite the presence of the Protector of Slaves. Thomas reported that a woman named Rosalie appeared at his office the morning of 25 March 1833 with “an infant at her breast,” alleging that her slaveholder, a Mme. L’Artigue, was trying to force Rosalie to “abandon her infant to the care of another [...] to be nourished on cow’s milk,” as Rosalie could not be spared from her service as a market woman.<sup>63</sup> Some enslaved women were humiliated, regularly abused, and separated from their children, and there was little legal recourse available to them, despite the presence of the Protector of Slaves.

Incidents of sexual violence towards bondswomen do not appear explicitly among the complaint records for the period of 1829–30. In the records examined for this chapter, enslaved women did not commonly complain of unwarranted sexual advancements or harassment in Mauritius. In only one case, a bonded woman named Raive complained that she was unfairly punished by her estate manager, a Mr. Colombe, and that she knew of no reason *why* she had been punished, “unless it be for having refused to allow him [Colombe] to be familiar with her,

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<sup>62</sup> Shane White and Graham White, “Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *The Journal of Southern History* 61, no. 1 (1995): 45–76.

<sup>63</sup> Richard Thomas to Honourable E. Lenora (sic), 25 March 1833, Port Louis, IC 30, NAM.

an attempt at which he had repeatedly made, though always refused by her.”<sup>64</sup> Colombe countered that Raive was a “great libertine” who was “common to all the blacks of the habitation.”<sup>65</sup> The Protector dismissed the case and Raive was confined to the plantation for four consecutive Sundays as punishment for making a “false complaint.” As highlighted by this case and those described above, the Protector of Slave’s records *do* offer compelling insight into the responses of enslaved women to the various figures of authority they answered to on estates, plantations, and in domestic dwellings.

These records also illuminate the mistreatment of enslaved children in Mauritius. On several occasions, bondswomen made formal complaints accompanied by their children, although the majority of child complainants—under the age of fifteen—seem to have been unaccompanied. In the case of fourteen-year-old Aurélie, another enslaved woman and friend on a neighbouring estate convinced the girl to make a complaint to the Protector when she was not permitted to visit her mother.<sup>66</sup> One of the more distressing accounts is that of Rosalie, a five-year-old girl brought to the Protector by her father, a free man of colour, and her enslaved mother. The girl’s father stated that while he was passing the dwelling where Rosalie lived, he saw his daughter tied up and gagged. When the Protector of Slaves asked Rosalie what offence she had committed, the girl could not name one.<sup>67</sup> The slaveholder in question, a Mr. Collier, stated that the child had been tied up and gagged for telling “a falsehood.” Thomas dismissed the case, but warned Collier that treating a young child in that manner was illegal.<sup>68</sup>

Evidently, the Protector of Slave’s services were repeatedly being sought, despite the fact that a high proportion of cases were dismissed, and Thomas continually sent enslaved

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<sup>64</sup> Complaint by Raive Kell, 19 November 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>65</sup> It is worth highlighting here the language used here by Colombe, which might indicate some manner of jealousy and hurt to his white ego when accusing Raive of being common with “all the blacks.”

<sup>66</sup> Complaint by Aurélie, 22 March 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>67</sup> Complaint by Rosalie, 3 April 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>68</sup> Complaint by Rosalie, 3 April 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

complainants back to their homes without offering any resolution to their grievances. It is very likely that information about the Protector—including his tendency to dismiss cases and punish those accused of giving false complaints—was widely shared among the enslaved inhabitants of Mauritius. Despite these outcomes, hundreds of unfree men, women, and children still chose to file grievances over the roughly five to six years that the Protector of Slaves and his assistants were operative. This suggests that the protection offices were sometimes serving an unintentional dual purpose. While the protection office did chiefly serve as an avenue for bondspeople to register complaints and to have their grievances investigated and tried according to the law, at the same time, many approached Thomas seeking help to protect or locate their children. As the next section reveals, some may have also visited protection offices in an attempt to subtly disrupt productivity and work.

### *Resistance and Protection*

The slave protection records, while offering insight into the nature of widespread corporal punishment inflicted upon men, women, and children in bondage in Mauritius, also demonstrate that bondspeople of both sexes engaged in subversive and resistant activities. The records illuminate both the subtle and overt nature of these activities, and the overlap between certain acts—like *petit marronage*—and the new slave protection laws. I also contend that the act of departing from an estate or domestic dwelling to visit a protection office and file a grievance became a method of resistance, particularly in cases when an enslaved person purposely fled to avoid corporal punishment, or when many labourers departed an estate to complain

simultaneously, thus seriously disrupting productivity.

Foremost, as explained in chapter one of this study, marronage (or flight) was widespread in Mauritius, and appeared frequently in the complaint records. *Petit marronage* was a temporary absence from one's slaveholder, while *grand marronage* involved flight for longer periods, and sometimes permanently.<sup>69</sup> The distinction between these two forms can be blurry for historians, as archival material rarely depicts an enslaved person's motivations or intentions, and colonial authorities rarely stopped to ask. In Mauritius, these hazy distinctions meant that bondspeople were often falsely accused of *petit marronage*. Indeed, bondspeople were frequently accused of running away when they were, in reality, trying to reach a slave protection office to register a complaint. Many slaveholders would not grant permission for bondspeople to visit the Protector of Slaves or one of his district offices, and as such, would-be complainants were often accused of running away when apprehended by Police. Many enslaved therefore sought out the Protector's services in secret and without permission. In an attempt to invalidate the complaints against them, slaveholders would often testify to the Protector or attorney general that complainants were notorious runaways or vagrants. Thus, regulations around marronage were entangled in the new slave protection laws, and a culture of marronage and marronage-related punishments persisted on the island well after the Protector's arrival.<sup>70</sup>

Richard Allen emphasizes that the lack of an adequate police force on the island, in the context of the slave population quadrupling between 1770 and 1820, contributed to widespread

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<sup>69</sup> Edward Alpers, "Flight to Freedom: Escape from Slavery among Bonded Africans in the Indian Ocean world, c. 1750-1962," in ed. Gwyn Campbell, *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2003), 53.

<sup>70</sup> Richard Allen has written extensively on the topic of marronage in Mauritius. See "A Serious and alarming daily evil: *Marronage* and Its Legacy in Mauritius and the Colonial Plantation World," *Slavery & Abolition* 25, no.2 (2004): 1-17, and *Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Labourers in Colonial Mauritius* (Port Chester, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999).



marronage and colonial fears of “dangerous” maroon communities forming in the hinterland.<sup>71</sup>

Allen estimates that in the late eighteenth century, about five percent of the servile population marooned annually; by 1820, the annual incidence of marronage reached eleven to thirteen per cent.<sup>72</sup> In fact, the complaint records for 1829–30 corroborate this high rate of marronage, as in almost half the cases (forty-four per cent), an enslaved person was accused of marooning.<sup>73</sup>

Often, when police arrested a bondsperson for *petit marronage* as they travelled to a protection office, they would spend one or several nights in the *bagne* before being transferred to the local slave protection office. For example, in December 1829, the police in Savanne arrested a woman named Pauline for marooning. Pauline stated that she was travelling to visit the Protector’s office to lodge a complaint that she was forced to work despite being ill, and that when she protested this to the field overseer, she was beaten. Mr. Dunienville, the owner of the estate in question, argued that Pauline had marooned and left her three children “without assistance” for over two months.<sup>74</sup> The Protector dismissed Pauline’s complaint, sent her to the hospital to be treated, and then returned her to Dunienville. In this twelve-month period, thirty-five per cent of marronage cases involved women, while fifty-seven per cent involved men.<sup>75</sup>

A bondsperson would also sometimes run away to avoid corporal punishment, fleeing directly to the Protector of Slaves office. In one case, a twenty-year-old unfree woman living in

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<sup>71</sup> Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen*, 50.

<sup>72</sup> Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen*, 49.

<sup>73</sup> It is impossible to verify if each and every unfree person accused of marronage in these records had, in fact, marooned. Yet, the work of previous scholars confirms that a very high percentage of slaves ran away for both short and long periods of time on the island. For more on marronage in Mauritius, see Vijaya Teelock and Julie Cornec, *Maroonage and the Maroon Heritage in Mauritius* (Réduit: University of Mauritius, 2005); Amédée Nagapen, *La marronage à l’Île de France–Île Maurice: Rêve ou riposte de l’esclave?* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Centre Culturel Africain, 1999); works by Richard Allen (see footnote 70); and Amitava Chowdhury, “Maroon Archaeological Research in Mauritius and its Possible Implications in a Global Context,” in ed. Lydia Wilson Marshall, *The Archaeology of Slavery: a comparative approach to captivity and coercion* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015).

<sup>74</sup> Complaint by Pauline, 17 December 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>75</sup> The other eight per cent involved a group complaint, and it is not always possible to ascertain the gender demographic of the individual complainants in these cases.

Pamplémousses, named Adèle, complained to Thomas of being beaten so violently that she could no longer use one of her arms to lift and carry the infants in her care. Adèle's slaveholder, Theodore Mothé, provided a very long and detailed account of the incident, in which he accused the complainant of "much ill-humour and murmuring," and of mistreating his two small children.<sup>76</sup> Mothé admitted to beating Adèle "in a fit of passion" with the reins of a bridle, because she had unceremoniously thrown one of his children onto a mattress, which he claimed "could have lamed or even killed the child." And then Adèle ran away.<sup>77</sup> While it is unclear whether Adèle had fled for a short period prior to seeking out the Protector of Slaves, it is abundantly clear that some bondspeople sought to avoid corporal punishment or ill-treatment by leaving their dwellings without permission to go directly to a protection office.

The slave protection offices, then, operated as new sites of resistance for the enslaved. The very act of leaving an estate or domestic habitation without permission or an appropriate pass—therefore risking accusations of marronage and confinement in the *bagne*—did not stop over two hundred slaves from doing so between March 1829 and March 1830. Moreover, they continued to make complaints *even though* a large percentage of complainants were being immediately dismissed, and the likelihood of being punished for making a false complaint was quite high. As Campbell, Alpers, and Salman suggest, resistance to slavery in the Indian Ocean world often manifested itself quite subtly, as "agency in systems of servitude was not [...] an issue of uprisings and revolt in which the participants were predominantly adult males. Rather, resistance assumed many different forms that were engaged in by female and child as well as by adult male bondspeople."<sup>78</sup> The act of visiting a protection office and making a verbal complaint

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<sup>76</sup> Complaint by Adèle, 31 March 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>77</sup> Complaint by Adèle, 31 March 1829.

<sup>78</sup> Gwyn Campbell, Edward Alpers & Michael Salman, eds., *Resisting Bondage in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 2.

served as a form of defiance for many.

When unfree labourers abandoned their work and dwellings as a group to visit a protection office, this proved even more disadvantageous and problematic for slaveholders and agricultural estates. In some cases, dozens of unfree workers would leave a single estate together to visit a protection office. On fourteen separate occasions between March 1829 and March 1830, a group of unfree labourers (consisting of three or more) together called on Thomas or an assistant protector. Thus, depending on the size of the group, an estate could be left without much of its labour force for several hours, if not a full day. This would have no doubt hindered daily productivity and output on agricultural plantations.<sup>79</sup> Thomas repeatedly told groups that it was illegal for so many labourers to abandon their work simultaneously; yet, parties of bondspeople continued to visit the protection offices.

In one illustrative case, on the morning of 8 April 1829, fifteen enslaved labourers waited at the door of the Assistant Protector of Slaves office in Grand Port. They had left their slaveholder's estate before sunrise in order to make a formal complaint with their local protection agent. Displeased that such a high number of labourers from one estate had simultaneously abandoned their work, the Grand Port assistant protector ordered that three individuals be selected to represent the group. He insisted that the rest "return peaceably to their work." Three men were selected to explain the grievances: Salamine, Jean Baptiste, and Arthur. Salamine, a thirty-five-year-old "Mozambique slave," stated that the estate overseer would not give him and his comrades "time to attend to the calls of nature." Jean Baptiste, another twenty-two-year-old enslaved man, also complained that they were often made to work until very late hours on Sundays, and with no extra compensation. The third, Arthur, a thirty-five-year-old

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<sup>79</sup> On average, these groups tended to have between ten and thirty individuals, with the highest being a group of sixty-nine individuals.

enslaved man, corroborated both accounts, and added that they were also given insufficient food rations.<sup>80</sup>

Following the verbal complaints delivered by these three men, the assistant protector interrogated Mr. Rozemont, the estate manager.<sup>81</sup> Rozemont indicated that when he began his position as estate manager, he found the fields in disarray. Groups of workers would regularly absent themselves for hours, without being sanctioned. In an effort to streamline labour, Rozemont enacted a rule that only one worker at a time could absent him or herself from the field. He also claimed that the men's accusations of insufficient rations and late work hours on the Sabbath were exaggerated. His evidence led the assistant protector to dismiss Salamine, Jean Baptiste, and Arthur's claims. To dissuade this particular group of labourers from engaging in future "tumultuous conduct," all were sentenced by the Protector to corporal punishment: thirty lashes each of the cat o' nine tails in the presence of all other "blacks" on the estate.<sup>82</sup> This ruling that an enslaved person be punished in front of his or her peers for charges such as lying, disobedience, and spreading discontent only further upheld the culture of violence and corporal punishment in Mauritius.

Why, in some cases, did groups of unfree labourers choose to complain together? Was it assumed that a grievance would be taken more seriously if the number of complainants, and therefore testimonies, was higher? Possibly. However, the evidence also suggests that enslaved labourers intentionally disrupted their own work by abandoning the fields to collectively file these complaints. On 24 November 1829, a band of sixty-nine labourers, belonging to a Mr. Brue from Rivière Noire, complained that they were forced to work very long hours, and that they

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<sup>80</sup> Complaint by a group of fifteen slaves, 8 April 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>81</sup> Assistant Protectors were usually white locals and Civil Commissaries who were given these posts, though many had no prior political experience. These men sometimes held a lower class status than the slaveholders they were asked to investigate, and as a result, the interactions between slaveholders and assistant protectors were likely very tense affairs.

<sup>82</sup> Complaint by a group of fifteen slaves, 8 April 1829.

were all mistreated by the *economes* (managers) on the estate.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, the group travelled to the central Protector of Slaves office in Port Louis, instead of visiting the assistant protector in their own district. Thomas sent the group speedily back to Rivière Noire, with the exception of two “commanders,” Egissee and Porphire, as well as five others. Egissee and Porphire stated that they were not aware of their local assistant protector’s office, nor that “they were acting wrong in coming off the estate in a band.”<sup>84</sup> They stated that they had left at ten o’clock the previous evening for the purpose of complaining. The Protector later visited their estate and interviewed other labourers and witnesses, all of whom denied the claims made by the complainants. The grievance was ultimately declared to be false, and Thomas reported that he believed the group complaint to be a scheme devised by Egissee and Porphire, the “two ringleaders of this plot,” who he sentenced to be put in chains “of the weight allowed by law, for the space of three months.”<sup>85</sup>

In this case, two bondsmen were accused of spreading discontent and persuading their peers to abandon their work to visit the Protector of Slaves. Even if Thomas was correct, and their complaint *was* false, these two men and sixty-seven of their peers decided to collectively leave their estate and travel together as a very large group to the urban capital of Mauritius, actions that ultimately served to disrupt labour and production on Brue’s estate for at least one full day. Uncovering the logistics of how this group travelled to Port Louis is beyond the capacity of this research (and likely beyond the capacity of the archival material), yet, this account offers compelling evidence for resistance to bondage. Once sixty-two members of the group had returned to their estate, many of them, it seems, were not willing to corroborate the claims made to the Protector by Egissee and Porphire, though they had *previously* been willing to abandon a full day’s work to lodge the complaint in the first place. It is likely that the group

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<sup>83</sup> An *econome* was similar to an estate manager or head administrator.

<sup>84</sup> Complaint by group of 69 slaves, 24 November 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>85</sup> Complaint by group of 69 slaves, 24 November 1829.

received admonishments upon their return, as well as the threat of violence, which would have dissuaded them from following through with the complaint.

In another case, Jean, a fifty-year-old bondsman living in Flacq, complained that he was inadequately fed, and that he had a wound on his foot that was never given proper medical attention. A doctor's medical report indicated that neither of these claims seemed to be true. Mr. Daubigny, Jean's slaveholder, stated that Jean had marooned very suddenly, which he (Daubigny) was "very surprised" by, given that he had owned Jean from infancy and had "always showed him the greatest kindness."<sup>86</sup> Though we will never know Jean's true intentions, it is possible that laying a complaint at the protection office may have sometimes acted as a pretext for a bondsperson to escape their estate and domestic dwelling, as well as an opportunity to complain about the routine infliction of corporal punishment and humiliation. In so-doing, they were also "sully[ing]" the name of their slaveholders. The act of visiting a Protector of Slaves office, then, took on a meaning separate from the complaint itself. These cases hint that the enslaved were sometimes using the protection office services to resist their bonds or to disrupt the labour they performed.

Furthermore, while *petit marronage* was widespread in Mauritius from the early eighteenth century onwards, spiking in the decades before the Emancipation Act (1833), it was not the sole form of rebellion practiced by the enslaved in the island. The complaint records also yield clues into other acts committed by bondspeople, including theft, arson, and even suicide. In the case of Aglaé, the pregnant twenty-two-year-old complainant mentioned in an earlier section of this chapter, her slaveholder (Mme. Descia) presented the Protector with a long list of acts committed by Aglaé for which she had been punished. According to Descia, Aglaé had obtained money under false pretenses, kept money that was not hers to keep, was constantly in the habit of

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<sup>86</sup> Complaint by Jean, 21 May 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

marooning, and had “allowed the mistress’ house to be endangered by fire.”<sup>87</sup> Aglaé was also accused of petty theft on several occasions. Thievery often appears in the complaint records, usually in the context of a complainant attesting that the punishment they received for an alleged theft was too harsh or unwarranted. Alfrida, a fifteen-year-old enslaved girl living in Port Louis, was accused of stealing clothing and other items in May 1829. The slaveholder in question declared that the complainant was “a great pilferer and a very bad girl in other ways,” and had locked Alfrida in the granary every night as punishment.<sup>88</sup>

There is also extensive evidence in the complaint records of enslaved labourers purposely working slowly (“go-slows”) or avoiding their work altogether.<sup>89</sup> A fifty-year-old unfree man named Francisque was accused of sleeping in the woods instead of collecting stones for the mason, and duly punished.<sup>90</sup> Francisque complained to the Protector that he was beaten “without reason.” Thomas dismissed the case and sentenced Francisque to receive twenty-five lashes, to be administered in the presence of the other “blacks” on the estate, for his “idle and perverse conduct.”<sup>91</sup> Slaveholders and the protection officials alike did not treat an active avoidance of work lightly, as demonstrated in the case of group complaints, too. In May 1829, Romeo and Télémaque were whipped “with great severity” for purposely spoiling the wooden planks they were sawing, despite “assuring the master that the work was going well.”<sup>92</sup> Romeo had complained to the Protector of Slaves that he was poorly fed and beaten unfairly. Upon further investigation, Thomas concluded that their slaveholder *had* beaten the two enslaved men too severely, and referred the case to the attorney general for further prosecution.

There are also three reports of attempted suicide in the 1829–30 complaint books. In

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<sup>87</sup> Complaint by Aglaé, 12 April 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>88</sup> Complaint by Alfrida, 19 May 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>89</sup> For more about “go-slows,” see Campbell, Alpers, and Salman, *Resisting Bondage*, 7.

<sup>90</sup> Complaint by Francisque, 28 May 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>91</sup> Complaint by Francisque, 28 May 1829.

<sup>92</sup> Complaint by Romeo, 28 May 1829, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

January 1830, the police were escorting a group of unfree workers back to their plantation when one man “seriously injured himself by thrusting a knife into his belly.”<sup>93</sup> The man was immediately transported to the hospital, and the record does not indicate whether he survived the injury. In a second case only five days later, the Chief Commissary of Police sent a thirty-four-year-old enslaved woman named Fanny to the Protector, following her attempted suicide by hanging in the courtyard of her slaveholder’s residence. Thomas determined that Fanny was unhappy because her husband was not allowed to visit her. However, “after receiving a due admonition for attempting suicide, [Fanny] promised never again to commit such a crime.”<sup>94</sup> Lastly, in a case that occurred about one month prior to the others, a bondswoman committed suicide by hanging. In his investigation, Thomas uncovered that she had received a severe “flogging” a few hours earlier, which was at the time illegal under *Ordinance no. 43*.<sup>95</sup> In the wider historiography of resistance to slavery, suicide was not an uncommon practice.<sup>96</sup> In Mauritius, the culture of enslavement and violence bred defiance and rebellious behaviour that could not be tempered by the presence of an imperfect system of slave protection.

## Conclusion

Defiant acts of slave marronage, evading punishment, and taking unauthorized time off work to visit a protection office are all very closely linked in the complaint records, and can be difficult

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<sup>93</sup> Complaint by group of 15 slaves, 4 January 1830, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>94</sup> Complaint by Fanny, 9 January 1830, Protector of Slaves Report, CO 172/27, NA.

<sup>95</sup> Thomas to Barry, Chief Secretary of Government, 10 December 1829, Port Louis, IC 21, NAM.

<sup>96</sup> For more on this subject, see Terri L. Snyder, *The Power to Die: Slavery & Suicide in British North America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), and any number of works discussing suicide by captives in the Middle Passage, including Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) and Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007).



to interpret. What role did the protection offices really play for bondspeople? In many accounts, like that of Adèle's, an enslaved person sometimes marooned to both escape punishment and to register a complaint. Many unfree labourers likely recognized that, in a tense moment, running to a protection office could provide some measure of respite from corporal punishment.

Bondspeople thus began to use this colonial office to directly avoid and defy their slaveholders. This was not explicitly the Protector of Slaves' intention, nor was it the intention of the British Crown in establishing this office. Yet Richard Thomas recognized early in his tenure in Mauritius that his role as Protector of Slaves would be contentious among French-Mauritian slaveholders, and that his services required enslaved people to, for the most part, leave their estates or dwellings without permission to do so. Moreover, when a person or group sought out a protection office, they were doing so despite the high likelihood that their complaint would be dismissed or never fully prosecuted by the attorney general, and despite the strong possibility that they might be subjected to corporal punishment by the Protector and/or their slaveholder for filing a "false" grievance.

The complainants, however, had one very important characteristic in common: they sought to affect some manner of change in the way they were treated. On the eve of Emancipation (1833–35) and with growing anti-slavery activism in British Indian Ocean colonies, the actions of the enslaved cannot be discounted. Some sought better food, to receive medical attention, or simply the permission to visit a family member in a different part of the island. Mauritian society in the 1820s was a violent place for the unfree, and the actions and decisions of the Protector of Slaves did not necessarily diminish this. Whether enslaved complainants were seeking actual legal recourse or not, by the end of March 1830, over three hundred slaves (in a population of 50–70,000) had visited a protection office on the island to

make a complaint, either individually or in a group. By 1835, hundreds more had also sought out this often-dubious form of protection. These narratives of mistreatment and action are crucial to broader discussions of women, slavery, and resistance in the British empire.

## Chapter Four

### British Missionary and Imperial Slave Education in Mauritius

Sixty children attending two mission schools in Port Louis sat their chiefly oral annual examinations on 20 December 1837, in the presence of parents, schoolmasters and schoolmistresses, and Reverend Jean Le Brun (1789–1865), a Jersey-born member of the London Missionary Society (LMS). An 1837 report on missionary education in Mauritius, published by Le Brun, indicates that there were forty boys and twenty girls present that day, though he does not give their ages.<sup>1</sup> Many of the children were poor, with parents who were either emancipated slaves or apprentices, living in the poorer Western and Eastern “camps”—sometimes also referred to as “suburbs”—of Port Louis. The boys were tested in English spelling and writing, arithmetic, and repetition from memory, in both French and English, of various hymns and prayers. They were also asked to recite the multiplication table. The girls, on the other hand, were tested only in English spelling and writing, and needlework; they had “not commenced arithmetic.”<sup>2</sup>

Mary Anne Jones (née Mabile), the wife of prominent LMS missionary David Jones, examined the girls in needlework, and judged twelve of them “well advanced” in common sewing. She then gave small gifts to the girls who had excelled the most; the report notes that “it is hoped [these gifts] will contribute to create a proper emulation among them, and give a greater

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<sup>1</sup> Few (if any) of the missionary sources I accessed indicate the exact ages of the children in the schools. For the purposes of my dissertation, I consider a “child” to be fifteen years and younger. There are brief archival references to one or two “Infant’s Schools” also set up in Port Louis, for very young children and infants. Hence, the children in Le Brun’s mission schools were likely between five and fifteen years old.

<sup>2</sup> Council for World Mission Archive/London Missionary Society (hereafter CWM/LMS)/13-Madagascar & Mauritius/02–Incoming Correspondence/01-Mauritius (hereafter 13/02/01), 1837, Box 2, Folder 3: Jean Le Brun, *Report of the examination of the Schools in the Camp on the declivity of the mountain of Port Louis, the 20<sup>th</sup> December 1837*, 1837, Port Louis.

stimulus to their attention and assiduity.”<sup>3</sup> It would appear, from the 1838, 1840, and 1841 reports, that boys were on no occasion given gifts, nor tested on any “technical” skills. Few were rewarded with anything beyond praise, although star pupils would sometimes be given extra drawing and English language lessons after class.<sup>4</sup>

In education for girls, mission schools in Mauritius focused on the development of domestic skills. Le Brun noted in his 1841 annual report to the LMS, for example, that one mother, upon seeing her daughter’s needlework exhibited in public view, cried out “Mon petit ça! – li même” (“That’s my little one! My own!”).<sup>5</sup> In many colonial settings, particularly in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century British Africa, colonized women and girls were expected to conform to certain domestic or “private” roles, and taught to assimilate to British notions of womanly behaviour and gendered occupations.<sup>6</sup> For example, a Mauritian Governor’s Memorandum from February 1824 specified that, amongst the “government slaves,” boys were to be taught to read, and girls were to be apprenticed in sewing.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, enslaved and formerly enslaved women and girls in British Mauritius were instructed in religious and elementary subjects as part of wider campaigns to instruct colonized and bonded populations

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<sup>3</sup> Le Brun, *Report of the Examination of Schools*, 1837.

<sup>4</sup> This practice is only recorded within Lady Mico’s Charity-funded schools, as outlined below.

<sup>5</sup> The original language in this case is Mauritian Creole. All translations are by the author. Jean Le Brun, *The Fifth Report of the State of the Mission Schools, Port Louis, 1841*, SOAS, CWM/LMS-Mauritius Incoming 2/4, 1841.

<sup>6</sup> For examples of these interactions in colonial nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century sub-Saharan Africa, see Karen Tranberg Hansen, *African Encounters with Domesticity* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), and several relevant case studies in Fiona Bowie et al., *Women and Missions: Past & Present* (Providence, RI: Berg, 1993). For an assessment of the historiography related to gender, missionaries, and British empire, see Elizabeth Prevost, “Assessing Women, Gender, and Empire in Britain’s Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missionary Movement,” *History Compass* 7, no. 3 (2009): 765–99. For reading on the ideological and material connectedness of the imperial metropole and colony, see Andrew Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harlow: Pearson, 2005); Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and Through the Nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, eds., *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Memo #41: *Index to Governor’s Memoranda*, 1824, RA271, National Archives of Mauritius (hereafter NAM). It is not specified at which school or location this would invariably take place. See Chapter Two of this dissertation for detailed accounts of “government slaves” in Mauritius.

leading up to and following February 1835, when the Emancipation Act took effect in Mauritius.

Part One of this chapter will explore Protestant missionary and British imperial archival material to trace the arrival of LMS missionary Jean Le Brun in Mauritius, and his work there between 1814 and 1833. The writings of Charles Telfair (1778–1833) and other British residents of, and visitors to, Mauritius similarly highlight religious and elementary instruction for the enslaved in this period. The chapter underscores important intersections between these forms of instruction and the anti-slavery movement. Both Le Brun and Telfair, in their observations of slavery, invoked the theme of humanitarianism, as well as the idea of education as a means of “bettering” or “civilizing” enslaved and newly emancipated peoples.<sup>8</sup>

In keeping with the broader aims of this dissertation, this chapter also analyzes the religious instruction given to bonded and free women and girls. In so doing, it attempts to answer the following questions: how were women and girls implicated in missionary education projects in Mauritius? What can historians learn about girls’ experiences from Le Brun’s annual reports to the LMS? Similarly, this chapter explores rhetorical overlap in the writings of Le Brun and his peers, related to education and emancipation, to elucidate how Le Brun and other missionaries—and later, the imperial government—envisioned elementary education for emancipated peoples. Unfortunately, few sources outline how the enslaved children themselves perceived of mission schooling and their teachers.

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<sup>8</sup> For more on missions and colonial encounters in the British Empire, see Andrew Porter, *Religions versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2004); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), chapter 3; Elizabeth Elbourne, “Religion in the British Empire,” in ed. Sarah Stockwell, *The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); Hilary M. Carey, *God’s Empire: Religion and Colonialism in the British World, c. 1801-1908* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Jeffrey Cox, *Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818-1940* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); Norman Etherington, ed., *Missions and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Rowan Strong, *Anglicanism and the British Empire, c. 1700-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Sarah Ann Curtis, *Civilizing Habits: Women Missionaries and the Revival of French Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds., *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005).

Part Two of the chapter will outline the history of the “Negro Education Grant” and Lady Mico’s Charity, which established schools throughout British slaveholding colonies, including Mauritius, following the Emancipation Act. As this section will demonstrate, colonial authorities generally believed that, once emancipated, ex-slaves would turn violently on their former enslavers unless they were given basic literacy and scriptural education. Following the formal emancipation of enslaved peoples in Mauritius in February 1835, imperial education schemes—in addition to already-established missionary schooling—were implemented to guarantee “civil order” once bondspeople were freed. As Part One of this chapter shows, however, in the two decades leading up to 1835, it was not easy to convince slaveholders or members of the enslaved population to partake in Protestant religious instruction. Evidence for unfree and emancipated women and girls participating in these instructional systems will be further examined in Part Two.

Throughout this chapter, “elementary education” is taken to refer to the three “R’s”: reading, writing, and basic arithmetic, though these subjects were often taught with the use of religious materials, like catechisms and the rote memorization of Gospel passages. Religious instruction per se refers more specifically to Sunday school education, the chief objective of which was to teach pupils about (and convert them to) Christianity—although children in day schools were also given religious instruction.<sup>9</sup> Trades and informal domestic education—including handicraft and artisanal training often reserved for women and girls; religious instruction—including oral repetition of catechisms and prayers; and basic elementary instruction were the three dominant forms of Protestant Christian education and training provided to the free poor and unfree labourers in Mauritius during this period. Missionaries

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<sup>9</sup> As discussed in Part Two, the two “streams” of religious and elementary education were more clearly divided with the introduction of schools funded by Lady Mico’s Charity.

strongly favoured elementary education for boys and domestic training for girls. Thus, as occurred in many parts of the empire, girls were frequently taught needlework and sewing in mission settings to imbue in them the ideals of British domesticity and family.<sup>10</sup> As well, for bondspeople, including most children, the record seems to indicate that they were only permitted to attend school for roughly two or three hours per day—they were otherwise working.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, this chapter acknowledges that the religious education and conversion of unfree peoples living under early British colonial rule was vastly problematic and politically complex. By examining the progression of mission schools and government-led educational initiatives for enslaved—and later, apprenticed and emancipated—peoples, it becomes evident that instruction was sometimes employed as a means of controlling unfree labourers. Additionally, much of the language and rhetoric employed in correspondence by Le Brun, Charles Telfair, and their peers, is negatively racialized, and reflects commonly-held, nineteenth-century (mis)beliefs about gender, the body, and much more.

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<sup>10</sup> The enslaved in Mauritius were more commonly fieldworkers and domestics, and much less frequently trained as skilled artisans by their slaveholders. For more on British domestic ideals in empire, see Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, “Home-Made Hegemony: Modernity, Domesticity, and Colonialism in South Africa,” in Hansen, *African Encounters with Domesticity*, 37–74; and D. Gaitskell, “At Home with Hegemony? Coercion and Consent in the Education of African Girls for Domesticity in South Africa before 1910,” in eds. Dagmar Engels and Shula Marks, *Contesting Colonial Hegemony: State and Society in Africa and India* (London: British Academic Press, 1994), 110–28.

<sup>11</sup> Charmaine Nelson writes about the denial of childhood to enslaved children in the Atlantic world in “Innocence Curtailed: Reading Maternity and Sexuality as Labor in Canadian Representations of Black Girls,” in eds. Gwyn Campbell and Elizabeth Elbourne, *Sex, Power, and Slavery* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014) (I built the index for this book—I must add that here for posterity.) While my dissertation does not engage directly with these questions of childhood, work, and enslavement, this would be a very compelling avenue for future research, and would enrich an analysis of unfree children in mission schools in Mauritius.

## ***Part One***

### *LMS Rev. Jean Le Brun and Early Mission Schools*

One of the earliest mentions in the LMS archive of a British missionary school in Mauritius comes from a letter dated 20 May 1814 by Frederick Hooper (1790–1832), writing from nearby Île Bourbon (present-day Réunion). He wrote that a “charitable” school had been opened three months earlier in Mauritius under the jurisdiction of Governor Farquhar, and Hooper hoped that a similar school might be set up in Île Bourbon. Hooper wrote that the school was “intended for Poor White and Black Creoles who are free, with all other Free Blacks.”<sup>12</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, Mauritius had a substantial free population of colour (*gens de couleur libres*) in addition to a large slave population,<sup>13</sup> all of whom were excluded from privately-run schools, including the Royal College, which catered exclusively to the children of white, mostly elite inhabitants of the island. Free people of colour, a population of some 7,366 in 1808, 14,133 in 1825, and 18,109 in 1830, did seek (and fight for) entry for their children into the Royal College;<sup>14</sup> however, white residents systematically excluded them for decades.<sup>15</sup> Until the arrival of LMS Reverend Jean Le Brun in 1814, very few poor and enslaved children or adults were given the opportunity for formal instruction, religious or otherwise. The

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<sup>12</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/1/1: Frederick Hooper to LMS, Bourbon, 20 May 1814.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Allen estimates that the enslaved population in Mauritius was approximately 60,000 in 1810, and close to 80,000 between 1817 and early 1819. Richard Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius* (Port Chester: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 53.

<sup>14</sup> These population figures come from Ramesh Ramdoyal, *The Development of Education in Mauritius, 1710-1976* (Réduit: Mauritius Institute of Education, 1977), 33, and Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen*, 82.

<sup>15</sup> A Royal College for the children of French residents in Mauritius was established in 1800. Under Governor Farquhar, the College was opened to the children of elite British colonists in 1813. Free people of colour experienced widespread racial discrimination, such as the regulation that no persons of colour could attend the Royal College. Free boys of colour were not admitted to the Royal College until 1832. See Ramdoyal, *Development of Education*, 42.



LMS's initial targets in Mauritius, then, were poor, free children of colour.<sup>16</sup>

Jean Le Brun was born on the island of Jersey on 7 September 1789, the son of Protestant parents from Saint-Malo, Brittany, who had fled the French Revolution.<sup>17</sup> He later trained at a missionary college in Gosport, Hampshire. He was ordained a Congregationalist minister<sup>18</sup> in Jersey in 1813, and in the same year, he—a fluent French speaker—was appointed by the LMS to Mauritius, which had only recently become a British territory, and was still predominantly French-speaking. Le Brun arrived in Mauritius on 18 May 1814 and immediately orchestrated plans, with the approval of the governor, to open a free mission school for poor children of colour.<sup>19</sup>

One of Le Brun's stated objectives was the instruction and Christian conversion of all free and unfree people of colour, a total population in Mauritius of well over 100,000 individuals by the late 1820s. However, this was unachievable without significant manpower. In 1814, Le Brun was one among many Protestant missionaries active in Indian Ocean Africa, yet for most of the 1810s and 1820s, he alone represented the LMS in Mauritius, though many missionaries temporarily visited on their way to or from Madagascar. As explored in the next section, the lack of women missionaries sent to the island to act as schoolteachers may have contributed to less attention being spared for the education of girls. Boys' schools were always prioritized financially, and girls' schools were opened only if sufficient funds and teaching staff remained.

Indeed, much of the information about Le Brun's schools in the period of 1814 to 1830

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<sup>16</sup> Le Brun wrote extensively about wanting to offer religious instruction to the enslaved, too, but it does not appear that he succeeded in this task until the 1820s.

<sup>17</sup> Gwyn Campbell, *David Griffiths and the Missionary "History of Madagascar"* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 607.

<sup>18</sup> These were Protestant reverends and churches in the Reformed tradition practicing Congregationalist church governance, in which each congregation independently and autonomously ran its own affairs. For more, see Charles Edward Jefferson, *Congregationalism* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1910).

<sup>19</sup> S. P. Oliver, 'Le Brun, John (d. 1865),' rev. Mary Heimann, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), date accessed 12 July 2017, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/view/article/16257>.

derives from the correspondence of impressed British visitors to Mauritius, as well as the island's other British residents. When David Griffiths, LMS missionary to Madagascar, visited Port Louis briefly in 1821, he wrote that Le Brun had established a spacious place of worship in the centre of town, as well as a "prosperous" school, with "110 boys and 84 girls instructed every day." Griffiths stated that Le Brun had "done wonders," given the "immorality and the profanity of the populace [and] the wretched condition of the poor slaves that are detained from a place of worship and looked upon as brutes."<sup>20</sup>

As a brief aside, the exact demographic composition of the students in Le Brun's first small schoolrooms in Port Louis is difficult for the historian to discern, partly because there are so few student attendance records available, and partly due to the unclear racial and labour "statuses" of many Mauritian inhabitants. Historian Vijaya Teelock discusses these subtle racial classifications common to nineteenth-century Mauritius in her book *Bitter Sugar: Sugar and Slavery in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Mauritius*. For example, according to Teelock, there were several categories of "free blacks," ranging from "prize negroes," government slaves, and government apprentices, to those who had been fully manumitted.<sup>21</sup> For the most part, the children of free (and poor) people of colour seem to have been Le Brun's initial pupils, though their exact ages are not given. Additionally, there is little indication of whether the children were working alongside their studies to supplement the family income.

By 1816, two years after his arrival, Le Brun had successfully established a small school system in the densely populated urban capital of Port Louis. Governor Farquhar characterized Le

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<sup>20</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/1/1: David Griffiths to LMS, Port Louis, 19 February 1821. In rural settings, the schools were generally established on plantations, and thus one can deduce that the majority of pupils who Griffiths refers to were either unfree children or unfree adults (the latter particularly in places where night classes were offered). It is much more difficult for historians to discern between free and unfree pupils in urban Port Louis, especially without access to attendance records.

<sup>21</sup> Vijaya Teelock, *Bitter Sugar: Sugar and Slavery in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Mauritius* (Moka, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1998), 268–9.

Brun as an “indefatigable missionary” who had succeeded in the “difficult task” of convincing the free population of colour in Port Louis to send their children to his schools to receive both elementary education and Protestant religious instruction.<sup>22</sup> By January 1817, Le Brun’s day schools served approximately one hundred boys and thirty girls.<sup>23</sup>

Charles Telfair, slaveholder and personal secretary to Governor Farquhar, was another keen, long-time advocate of the LMS. He had housed and employed David Jones, prominent missionary to Madagascar, when the latter was convalescing after a disastrous LMS expedition to Madagascar.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, while in Mauritius, Jones met his future wife, Mary Ann Mabile, the French-Mauritian sister-in-law of Le Brun.<sup>25</sup> Telfair reported in 1823 that, in addition to his teaching duties, Le Brun was preaching “in French three times a week and once a week in English, besides giving a public lecture in the Military Hospital every Wednesday.”<sup>26</sup> A Sunday School with sixty to seventy girls and boys was also thriving by 1823. For this school, Le Brun had also employed an assistant, a free man of colour (for whom no name was recorded) who was “most assiduous in attending to it.”<sup>27</sup> By 1823, then, Le Brun was making some headway, converting at least some of the free population to Protestantism, and preaching to at least two congregations, in English and French.

Another of Le Brun’s schools had 125 students who were making exceptional progress in “reading, writing, and accounts [...] French and English grammar, composition, and translation in both languages.”<sup>28</sup> Telfair indicated that many school graduates subsequently made “decent livings in trades and occupations,” and that many of the scholars who were “fit for learning

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<sup>22</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/1/1: Robert Farquhar to LMS, Port Louis, 20 May 1816.

<sup>23</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/1/1: Jean Le Brun to LMS, Port Louis, 7 January 1817.

<sup>24</sup> For a thorough history of LMS activities in Madagascar, see Campbell’s *David Griffiths and the Missionary “History of Madagascar”* (2012).

<sup>25</sup> Campbell, *David Griffiths*, 629.

<sup>26</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/1/2: Charles Telfair to LMS, Port Louis, 4 November 1823.

<sup>27</sup> Telfair to LMS, 4 November 1823.

<sup>28</sup> Telfair to LMS, 4 November 1823.

trades” were bound apprentices who attended only half days at the school.<sup>29</sup> This indicates that by the early 1820s, Le Brun was no longer only teaching poor free children, but also young (likely male) adults who were government apprentices. As explored in chapter two of this dissertation, “prize negroes” and government slaves or apprentices were people captured from slaving vessels in the western Indian Ocean by British anti-slavery naval patrols, and deposited at various port towns, including Port Louis, where they were indentured on fourteen-year contracts to the colonial government, as well to private residents and estates.<sup>30</sup> They were commonly employed in government-supervised works, such as public works, institutions, and policing. In 1825, Le Brun wrote to the Mauritian Governor Galbraith Lowry Cole (g. 1823–28), Farquhar’s successor, to report that he [Le Brun] had been asked by “several of the inhabitants of this town and neighbourhood who have Government Apprentices, to afford their moral and religious instruction.”<sup>31</sup> However, in the late 1820s, only a fraction of Le Brun’s students were likely the children of these “recaptive” peoples.

In late 1825, Le Brun began building a chapel in Rivière du Rempart, a rural district northeast of Port Louis (see Figure 1). Le Brun was slowly expanding his mission into districts outside Port Louis. In Rivière du Rempart, he aimed to build two schools, one for boys and one for girls, as well as lodging for the chapel’s minister.<sup>32</sup> There may have been a call by his congregation in this region for the education of children, though this is only speculative. It is unclear when a minister was first appointed to this particular chapel, but once a month, Le Brun also travelled there to preach to the congregation of thirty or forty. By September 1826, Le Brun was dividing his time between the free boys’ school in Port Louis, the school in the “Yoloff’s

<sup>29</sup> Telfair to LMS, 4 November 1823.

<sup>30</sup> See Part Two of Chapter Two of this dissertation for an overview of recaptivity. Also see Marina Carter, *The Last Slaves: Liberated Africans in Nineteenth-Century Mauritius* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Centre for Research on Indian Ocean Societies, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/1/3: Le Brun to Lowry Cole, Port Louis, 1825–26.

<sup>32</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/1/3: Le Brun to LMS, Port Louis, 15 December 1825.

camp,”<sup>33</sup> a much poorer suburb of Port Louis inhabited by “free Blacks” who were largely of Malagasy descent, and the two small schools in Rivière du Rempart, though he visited the girls’ school much less frequently. In general, girls’ schools in Mauritius were considered to be “women’s domains” run by schoolmistresses, like Le Brun’s wife, Coralie.<sup>34</sup>

By 1826, the free boys’ school in Port Louis had 182 students, and the nearby chapel was well-attended with services in English and French. In the Yolloff’s camp, twenty-five to thirty children were regularly attending two-hour classes at school, three times per week.<sup>35</sup> Each Friday, Le Brun would also “speak a word of Jesus” to the parents who accompanied their children. Le Brun proudly wrote that one mother gushed to her neighbours that her son “va veni bon chretien” (will become a good Christian) by attending the day school.<sup>36</sup> In many missionary situations, adults wished to become literate, too. Teachers like Le Brun encouraged their pupils to take their learning materials home to share with their parents, in the hope that literacy and a familiarity with Christianity would spread into the family.

Unfortunately, school and church attendance statistics are scarce, and where they do exist, they do not tend to include many demographic details about the congregation or students. For example, Le Brun reported that from September 1825 to September 1826, seventy-nine new pupils entered one of his schools (bringing the total to 253, as 174 were already enrolled as of September 1825), and sixty-three pupils left the same school, bringing the total number of students to 190. However, absences were frequent, and Le Brun possibly embellished these specific attendance numbers to make a case for more funding from London, as this particular

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<sup>33</sup> The Yolloff’s Camp was a much poorer suburb of Port Louis, inhabited by “free Blacks” who were largely of Malagasy descent, having arrived in Mauritius as slaves during the period of French rule.

<sup>34</sup> Le Brun married Coralie Mabilie (1799–1856/9) in August 1818. They had several children, some of whom followed Le Brun into missionary work, like his son, John Joseph Le Brun.

<sup>35</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/1/3: Le Brun to LMS, Port Louis, 4 September 1826.

<sup>36</sup> Le Brun to LMS, 4 September 1826.

report also contains a rather long list of school costs and receipts.<sup>37</sup>

According to the 1826 census, there were 8,339 female and 7,105 male “free blacks,” and 26,455 female and 42,621 male enslaved persons living in Mauritius.<sup>38</sup> Thus, based on the low numbers in attendance at his schools and chapels, Le Brun would have come into contact with only a small, mixed fraction of these total populations. Nonetheless, the small schoolhouses *were* attracting students throughout the 1820s. Poor, free people of colour, emancipated adults with children, and holders of enslaved domestic workers and apprentices saw some merit in Christian and elementary teaching and learning.<sup>39</sup> Literacy, improved English and French language skills for their children, and the sense of community offered by church attendance and Sunday school were likely the main draws.

### *British Colonialism and Anti-Slavery in the Indian Ocean World*

The 1820s were a critical era in which the new world power—England—adopted an attitude of cultural, religious, economic, political, and military superiority, which was partially reflected in mission work. As Elizabeth Elbourne writes, “the rhetoric of missions at the outset emphasized that Britain was the recipient of divine favour [...] and thus needed to act as an agent of God’s

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<sup>37</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/1/3: *État sommaire de l'École de la Mission établie à Maurice sous les auspices du Gouvernement par le Reverend Le Brun*, 1 September 1825 to 26 September 1826.

<sup>38</sup> CO 172/48, ff. 114-15, National Archives, Kew (hereafter NA), as recorded in Appendix A3 of Anthony Barker, *Slavery and Anti-Slavery in Mauritius, 1810-33: The Conflict between Economic Expansion and Humanitarian Reform under British Rule* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996).

<sup>39</sup> Patrick Harries has written extensively about literacy in the context of Southern Africa. See Patrick Harries, “Missionaries, Marxists and Magic: Power and the Politics of Literacy in South-East Africa,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27, no. 3 (2001): 405–27.

will on behalf of other nations less able to do so.”<sup>40</sup> The notion that indigenous and bonded peoples throughout the British empire needed to be “civilized” informed the mandate of many missionary groups, including the LMS. In sub-Saharan Africa, this sometimes included turning indigenous men into “(metaphorical) virtuous Englishmen”<sup>41</sup> and domesticating indigenous women. In the early nineteenth century, many missionaries from Mauritius adopted similar rhetoric.

Numerous scholarly works have addressed the complex relationships between colonized peoples and missionaries throughout sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian Ocean World.<sup>42</sup> For example, in her examination of colonial South Africa, Elbourne posits that LMS missionaries and converted Khoekhoe “mobilized” Christianity each for their own ends. Elbourne writes that, initially, many individuals visited the Bethelsdorp LMS station seeking “shelter from violence, greater economic independence, literacy, or indeed salvation”; in other words, colonized peoples visited mission stations for a plethora of reasons, and not only to learn to read, or to convert to Christianity. They sometimes visited the station because they sought protection, “passes” to travel, or resources.<sup>43</sup> Similar studies of missionary activity in East Africa have demonstrated that some African groups were more likely to engage with missionaries and mission stations in

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<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853* (Montréal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2002), 15.

<sup>41</sup> Elbourne, *Blood Ground*, 15.

<sup>42</sup> For example, see Clifton Crais, *The Politics of Evil: Magic, State Power and the Political Imagination in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Gwyn Campbell, “Missionaries, Fanompoana and the Menalamba Revolt in late nineteenth century Madagascar,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 15, no. 1 (2008): 54–73; Heather J. Sharkey, ed., *Cultural Conversions: Unexpected Consequences of Christian Missionary Encounters in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2013); J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Paul V. Kollman, *The Evangelization of Slaves and Catholic Origins in Eastern Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005); Steven Kaplan, “The Africanization of Missionary Christianity: History and Typology,” in *Indigenous Responses to Western Christianity* (New York: New York University Press, 1995); Christopher Harding, *Religious Transformation in South Asia: the meanings of conversion in colonial Punjab* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Vincent Huyghues-Belrose, *Les premiers missionnaires protestants de Madagascar, 1795-1827* (Paris: INACLO, 2001).

<sup>43</sup> Elbourne, *Blood Ground*, 161–2.

order to secure medicine, food, and other resources, and women with children sometimes sought out missionaries to secure safety and shelter for their families.<sup>44</sup> I point to these cases simply to highlight that poor and unfree people of colour in Mauritius, for example, may have likewise had many motivations for participating in missionary instruction, beyond the desire to adopt literacy and Christianity, and these considerations are crucial to the study of early mission schools.<sup>45</sup>

In British slaveholding colonies, missionary conversion projects often overlapped and interacted with pre-emancipation, anti-slavery advocacy aimed at “ameliorating” the plight of the enslaved. Anti-slavery legislators in Britain began in the early nineteenth century to agitate against slavery in the western Indian Ocean world, following the introduction of the *Slave Trade Act* (1807). As noted by Seymour Drescher, only a small proportion of “concern and energy” was devoted to Mauritius by anti-slavery advocates and the Colonial Office in London, in comparison with that devoted to the West Indies.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, in the 1820s, more liberal policies related to corporal punishment, marriage between bondspeople, and manumission were introduced to the island as part of wider empire-wide slavery amelioration policies, only to be opposed by many local French-Mauritian land owners.

New regulations related to slaveholding in Mauritius largely following the report compiled by the Commission of Eastern Enquiry in 1829 (as outlined at length in chapter two). As well, the Protector of Slaves arrived in 1829 with a mandate to receive and investigate complaints made by the enslaved, relative to their treatment at the hands of slaveholders and

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<sup>44</sup> See Elizabeth E. Prevost, *The Communion of Women: Mission and Gender in Colonial Africa and the Metropole* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Marcia Wright, *Strategies of Slaves & Women: Life-Stories from East/Central Africa* (New York: L. Barber Press, 1993).

<sup>45</sup> An interesting future project might investigate how vagrancy laws in Mauritius, and the necessity for enslaved persons to carry “passes” when moving around the island, might have influenced their contact with mission stations. For example, in the case of the Khoekhoe in South Africa, mission stations gave out such passes. See Elbourne’s *Blood Ground*, Chapter Two, for more on this subject.

<sup>46</sup> Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 156.



estate overseers (as discussed in chapter three). However, the British governors of Mauritius from 1823 to 1833 were afraid that they might antagonize French-Mauritian inhabitants, many of whom were prominent slaveholders and planters, or undermine the economy by raising labour costs. Therefore, they did not effectively enforce many of the new amelioration regulations, nor did they really support the Protector of Slaves in his mandate.<sup>47</sup> This led famous anti-slavery activist, Zachary Macaulay, to publish a scathing criticism of slaveholding in Mauritius in the *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter* of January 1829.<sup>48</sup> Faced with increasing abolitionist pressure, French slaveholders began to fear what they viewed as the imminent prospect of full emancipation, and they perceived many British colonial authorities and residents, including the Protector of Slaves (Richard Thomas) and LMS missionary Jean Le Brun, to be “abolitionist” agitators.

In addition to preaching and teaching, Le Brun was also vitally concerned with issues of slavery and abolition in Mauritius, including the plight of enslaved women and girls. For example, he wrote to the LMS Board of Directors in London that common “unions” between Europeans in Mauritius and their “female Negro slaves” was extremely troublesome. He argued that the children produced from these unions—“mulattos,” as he referred to them—were ignored by their European fathers, which led to familial tension and economic complications related to inheritance. Le Brun asserted that the best way to prevent “all this mixture and trouble”<sup>49</sup> would be for “white men [to] only marry white women”<sup>50</sup> and for non-whites to also only marry within

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<sup>47</sup> I write at much more length about slavery amelioration and the Protector of Slaves in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

<sup>48</sup> “A Picture of the Negro Slavery Existing in the Mauritius,” *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter* 2, no. 19 (January 1829).

<sup>49</sup> Le Brun also wrote that he witnessed girls as young as twelve years of age being sold to “Gentlemen” as prostitutes, and “speaking of things that would make a European lady of 20 years blush.” Le Brun to LMS, 7 January 1817.

<sup>50</sup> Le Brun to LMS, 7 January 1817.

their own racial category.<sup>51</sup> In this correspondence, Le Brun's primary concerns were mixed-race marriages and the women of colour involved. Notably, he never commented upon the fact that many of the European men involved in mixed-race marriages were possibly married to women back in England, and therefore having extra-marital affairs. Additionally, Le Brun believed that laws should be promulgated forbidding European men to live with enslaved women, and that any man found guilty of doing so should be fined and required to marry the woman "whom he has injured." Some of Le Brun's opinions would have no doubt been met with hostility by slaveholding men in Mauritius who had no intention of ending their relationships or sexual affiliations with unfree women in their possession. There is also no indication of how Le Brun expressed these views locally. It is possible that he may have addressed these issues in his Sunday sermons and in other public venues. If so, some of these concerns related to the actions of white men interacting with unfree women of colour may have rendered him less popular with residents in the island. As discussed at more length below, Le Brun's arrival in Mauritius and his subsequent mission work there interplayed with broader colonial tensions related to anti-slavery and British colonialism in the wider western Indian Ocean world.

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<sup>51</sup> Le Brun's primary concern in this correspondence relates to mixed-race marriages and the women involved. He did not comment upon extra-marital relationships.

The presence of a large French-Catholic population was a major obstacle to Le Brun's Protestant missionary project in Mauritius. French-Mauritian slaveholder aversion to anti-slavery activism overlapped with concerns that Le Brun and his peers were spreading Protestant teachings and practices to the enslaved, endeavours they virulently opposed.

Upon his arrival to Mauritius, Le Brun characterized the unfree population—most of whom were owned by French-Catholic slaveholders—as having no religious instruction whatsoever. This assertion was corroborated by fellow residents of the Mascarene Islands, including Charles Telfair.<sup>52</sup> Though the *Code Noir* (a decree regulating conditions of slavery in the French empire) stipulated that Catholic landowners must baptize their slaves, few did so.<sup>53</sup> Le Brun and his peers painted French-Mauritian slaveholders and authorities as broadly resistant to literacy and religion for the enslaved population, and there were likely several reasons for this. First, as illustrated in chapter three, slaveholders did not want ameliorated conditions for their enslaved property, who comprised largely unskilled labour. They were also generally antagonistic towards the newly installed British authorities, like Richard Thomas, the Protector of Slaves. In general, Mauritian slaveholders were resistant to anything that might enable organization among the enslaved, and thus increase the potential for resistance or rebellion. Elementary education fell into this category, as the next section illustrates. Second, because many French-Mauritian residents disliked the newly installed British authorities, and because the majority (if not all) of French-Mauritian residents were Roman Catholic, they were also

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<sup>52</sup> My dissertation focuses exclusively on the Protestant missionaries active in Mauritius, as the island was under British rule during the period I am investigating.

<sup>53</sup> Article 1. *Ordonnance, ou, Code noir: lettres patentes en forme d'Édit concernant les esclaves des Isles de Bourbon et de France, décembre 1723*, NAM.

antagonistic towards Protestantism. More broadly, they demonstrated animosity towards British individuals who they perceived as attempting to undermine the existing structure of slavery.

These complex anxieties naturally impacted LMS projects. French-Catholic residents purposefully obstructed Protestant missionary attempts to purchase land on which to build chapels and schoolhouses, to acquire teaching materials, and to recruit children and adults to attend and support missionary education. Le Brun wrote animatedly about French-Catholic enmity, stating in January 1817 that “the more ground the Gospel gains [in Mauritius], the more my enemies increase.”<sup>54</sup> It was only with strong support from Governor Farquhar, a man closely interested in LMS initiatives in both Mauritius and Madagascar, that Le Brun was initially able to erect the first schoolhouse and Protestant place of worship on the island.

Once built, Le Brun’s Protestant schools also drew the ire of French-Catholic inhabitants. Le Brun reported to his LMS superiors that “men” were stopping children in the streets from attending his school, and accusing him of “wish[ing] to let all the slaves at liberty.”<sup>55</sup> Evidently, in the minds of French slaveholders, Le Brun’s Protestant chapels and schools were linked to the broader imperial anti-slavery project. It remains unclear, of course, whether there actually were any enslaved children (possibly belonging to French-Catholic slaveholders) attending Le Brun’s school and services at this time. Regardless, French-Catholic residents were still bothered by the thought of Protestant religious instruction being offered to the non-white population, and continued to harass both Le Brun and his students well after 1817.

This tension also translated into difficulties for Le Brun when he eventually sought to access land on which to build a larger schoolhouse, which he was continually denied. One French landowner reported Le Brun to the police on the false grounds that Le Brun was helping

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<sup>54</sup> Le Brun to LMS, 7 January 1817.

<sup>55</sup> Le Brun to LMS, 7 January 1817.

certain “Malgaches” (those of Malagasy descent) to plan a rebellion.<sup>56</sup> Again, evidence suggests that in the minds of French-Catholic residents and slaveholders, Protestant instruction was inevitably linked to the loss of an important unfree labour force, as well as resistant behaviour among the enslaved. Three years into his residency in Mauritius, Le Brun wrote to George Burder about these difficult interactions, stating exasperatedly, “you cannot imagine what I have to endure here.”<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, Le Brun had established possibly up to four free schools by 1820, with approximately 140 boys and sixty-three girls, all of whom he “instructed in the catechism and reading in the Bible, though all of them are children of Catholic parents.”<sup>58</sup> LMS teaching, for the most part, followed the Lancastrian system, which tended to be non-sectarian and allowed for many subjects to be instructed simultaneously.<sup>59</sup> Evidently, nominally “Catholic” free people of colour began sending their children to Le Brun for Protestant elementary and religious instruction, which leads to a host of intriguing questions. Were the parents of these children newly emancipated, or from several generations of freed people? With what regularity did these parents practice Catholicism, and if emancipated, were they only considered to be Catholic through previous affiliation with their former French-Catholic slaveholders? Did distinctions of religious affiliation matter to free people of colour in Mauritius? The records offer few precise indications.<sup>60</sup>

By the mid- to late 1820s, Le Brun was almost certainly instructing students from both

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<sup>56</sup> Le Brun to LMS, 7 January 1817.

<sup>57</sup> Le Brun to LMS, 7 January 1817.

<sup>58</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/1/1: Le Brun to LMS, Port Louis, 5 December 1820.

<sup>59</sup> M. Kazim Bacchus, *Utilization, Misuse, and Development of Human Resources in the Early West Indian Colonies* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006), 222. The Lancastrian System, also known as the “Monitorial” System, popular from 1798 to 1830, involved a small number of adults instructing more advanced students who would then, in turn, teach their less advanced peers. This allowed for a large number of students to be instructed in more subjects, at a lower cost, as fewer schoolteachers needed to be hired.

<sup>60</sup> A comprehensive study of Catholic and Protestant church and mission interactions in early British Mauritius is much needed, and would be a fantastic avenue for future research.

the enslaved and apprenticed classes, though not always within the “day school” setting. By September 1826, some sixty unfree labourers regularly attended Sunday School in Port Louis each week, and “about 70 slaves and liberated negroes” received instruction twice a week.<sup>61</sup> Le Brun wrote that every Wednesday, with slaveholders’ consent, he met with enslaved persons for two or two and a half hours’ instruction. He reported that “some of [the slaves] begin to spell a few words,” and he hoped their ability to read the Bible would improve by the end of the year.<sup>62</sup>

A prospectus (printed school booklet or programme) for 1825, titled *Regulations of School for Instruction of Apprentices and Servants, established at Port Louis*, describes some of the minor classroom rules and major institutional regulations governing the student body. For example, no more than twelve students were permitted in each class, and classes were to be dismissed at two minute intervals to avoid “tous attroupement à la porte” (crowding in the doorway).<sup>63</sup> More broadly, the schools’ central mandate was, with the “clear and full consent” of their slaveholders, “to instruct apprentices and domestics in Evangelical morals” through both oral and reading lessons of prayers and hymns. The issue of “consent” is worth unpacking here. This term indicates that Le Brun and the LMS, in theory, only instructed unfree pupils if their owners permitted it. It follows, then, that some slaveholders did *not* wish their unfree workers to receive instruction, and did *not* give consent. This stipulation concerning a slaveholder’s consent may also suggest that some bondspeople may have tried to obtain access to religious or elementary instruction, but were rejected for not having been granted clear consent by their owners. This would all have further complicated Le Brun’s mission.

Yet, Le Brun conceded in January 1827 that despite “considerable torment” upon his

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<sup>61</sup> The “liberated” individuals he refers to here may have been living in or adjacent to the Yolloff’s camp. CWM/LMS/13/02/01/1/3: Le Brun to LMS, Port Louis, 4 September 1826.

<sup>62</sup> Le Brun to LMS, 4 September 1826.

<sup>63</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/1/3: *Regulations of School for Instruction of Apprentices and Servants, established at Port Louis*, Port Louis, 1826.

arrival, and thwarted attempts to build schools for and instruct the population of colour (free and unfree), his Christian teachings and elementary instruction were finally having “a favourable effect upon the character of Blacks.”<sup>64</sup> Despite continuous French animosity, Le Brun’s—and by extension, the LMS’s—“civilizing mission” was slowly underway in Mauritius, bolstered by increasing imperial and public support for the education of enslaved labourers as emancipation drew nearer.

### *Charles Telfair & the Anti-Slavery Movement*

Beyond the walls of Le Brun’s chapels and mission schools, bondspeople were also being educated in religious and elementary instruction on a small number of the island’s sugar plantations. Reverend A. Denny, Chief Civil Chaplain of Mauritius, wrote in June 1829 that on Charles Telfair’s two estates at Beau Mangier and Bon Espoir in the Flacq district (see Figure 1), schools were being established “for the education of [Telfair’s] slaves in the principles of the Protestant religion.”<sup>65</sup> Denny reported that there were about eighty children who were taught to read scriptural texts and to write each day for two hours, and that each Sunday, the adults were assembled to “hear prayers read by the masters.” Denny also proclaimed that Telfair was, at that time, “the only individual in the colony, lay or clerical, who [permitted] elementary instruction to be imparted to his slaves.”<sup>66</sup> Indeed, Telfair’s educational efforts began very early. He was a keen advocate of the LMS, and employed missionary David Jones as early as 1817 and 1818.

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<sup>64</sup> Statement by Le Brun to the Commissioners of Inquiry, 27 January 1827, CO 415/15, series 4, NA.

<sup>65</sup> Reverend A. Denny to the Protector of Slaves, Richard Thomas, 19 June 1829, Parliamentary Papers Online (PP), (262), 539.

<sup>66</sup> Denny to Thomas, 19 June 1829.

Religious and elementary instruction on Telfair's estates has been widely documented, and was somewhat controversial at the time. Telfair was a man who wore many hats. He was the foreign personal secretary to Governor Farquhar, as well as a wealthy landowner, slaveholder, botanist, and a self-proclaimed "innovator."<sup>67</sup> He wrote widely and earnestly about what he considered to be the peaceful state of slavery in Mauritius, and about his own efforts to introduce religious instruction to the enslaved adults and children on his three main plantations, Bel Ombre—located at the southwest tip of the island, in present-day Savanne—and Bon Espoir and Beau Mangier—both located northeast of Port Louis in the Pamplemousses district.

In 1830, Telfair published a 260-page text, including a lengthy appendix, in heated response to anti-slavery activists who had recently targeted Mauritius in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, a monthly publication founded in London by anti-slavery activist Zachary Macaulay. Anthony Barker has written extensively about abolitionists "discovering" the on-going slave trade in British Mauritius (and the Mascarene Islands) in the late 1820s, and increasingly pushing for action to be taken against Governor Farquhar and his successors G. Lowry Cole and Charles Colville, all of whom were accused of allowing the slave trade to prosper well after the *Slave Trade Act* of 1807. One article, published in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* in 1829, singled out Telfair's Bel Ombre estate to highlight the perceived high mortality rate of enslaved workers in Mauritius, the poor conditions under which they laboured, and the generally harsh corporal punishment extolled upon them.<sup>68</sup> In his published text, Telfair responded angrily to these "false" reports, defending himself and his Mauritian slaveholding peers against what he considered to be an unfairly harsh portrayal of slave ownership on the island, propagated by activists in England who had never set foot in the island. However, Telfair's text also proves immensely helpful in

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<sup>67</sup> Barker, *Slavery and Anti-Slavery in Mauritius*, 20.

<sup>68</sup> "A Picture of the Negro Slavery Existing in the Mauritius," *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter* 2, no. 19 (January 1829).



drawing a more complete picture of education for the enslaved in Mauritius. Telfair wrote about the initiatives he had established for the religious instruction of the unfree labourers on his estates, and how they were received by other landowners.

Telfair was so affronted by the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*'s suggestion that slaveholding in Mauritius was unsavory that he commissioned letters of reference and positive testimonies from several acquaintances, and official "declarations" from labourers, superintendents, and other individuals familiar with his estates, all of which he published. Friends and peers (almost all white, elite males) were asked to testify to the prosperity and good health of Telfair's enslaved labourers, and to the positive effects of his system of elementary education and religious instruction. For example, Telfair claimed that, with the introduction of elementary instruction on his estate, "drunkenness [had] disappeared, that crimes have become more rare than formerly, and that desertion has ceased at Belombre, [and] those meliorations have been caused by the children reading to, and teaching their parents."<sup>69</sup> The positive effects of education were also framed and described by Telfair and others as improving the work ethic of bondspeople, thus benefitting the Mauritian sugar economy.

Additionally, Telfair reported that he began instructing the enslaved as early as 1810, the first year of British rule in Mauritius, and several years before British slavery amelioration policies were introduced in the island.<sup>70</sup> Telfair wrote that "I commenced a course of instruction with the Slaves in my own family [in 1810], and employed a priest and a schoolmaster at my own expense."<sup>71</sup> Le Brun did not arrive in Mauritius for another four years, making Telfair one

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<sup>69</sup> Extract from an official report of Reverend R.E. Jones, Chief Military Chaplain of Mauritius, 27 June 1827, in Charles Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery at Mauritius: since the British Occupation in 1810: in refutation of anonymous charges promulgated against government and that colony* (Mauritius: n.p., 1830), 179.

<sup>70</sup> Though Mauritius was captured on 3 December 1810, British authorities did not start moving to the island en masse until the following year.

<sup>71</sup> Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery*, 66.

of, if not the first, British colonist to offer instruction to his bondspeople in the island.<sup>72</sup> Twenty years later, the enslaved children on Telfair's estates, and some of the "more advanced, intelligent men" (with no mention of women) were reportedly being taught daily "to read, write, and cast accounts, and were duly instructed in the principles of morality, and the practice of religious duties."<sup>73</sup> One of the estate schools opened daily at midday, and attendance varied from forty to sixty students. Children were given their own learning materials, including "a copybook, a bible, a catechism, and a book of hymns and canticles."<sup>74</sup> At 2:30 pm, the children would put on their "working clothes" and go to the public kitchen for their rations.<sup>75</sup> Telfair wrote that scholars with "remarkably good" conduct were, as a reward, asked to eat with the family in his home, at his table. This style of elementary education was introduced on all three of his estates.

Telfair had also kept in contact with "influential West India proprietors" and various missionary societies, so that when Le Brun arrived in 1814, he was met with open arms by Telfair, who was familiar with the missionary project, and who aided and served Le Brun and the LMS from then on. As with Le Brun's early mission schools, the instruction on Telfair's estates combined the "3 R's" with religious instruction. During the 1810s and 1820s, Telfair trained religious instructors (catechists) of his own, including Richard Lambert, a Creole man. Lambert, for whom little biographical information is available, was commended by Telfair for publishing the first Mauritian Creole catechism, and was later made the head of the Government School for Slaves in the Réduit district. Telfair also reported that Reverend R.E. Jones, the Military Chaplain in Mauritius, instructed the enslaved on his estates and gave sermons in Mauritian

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<sup>72</sup> Some French-Mauritian slaveholders were likely providing basic religious instruction to their enslaved labourers, as the *Code Noir* stipulated that all Catholic landowners must baptize their slaves. A deep dive into the private Catholic Church archives in Port Louis would yield more information into this phenomenon.

<sup>73</sup> Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery*, 70.

<sup>74</sup> Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery*, 71–2.

<sup>75</sup> Unfortunately, nothing else is said about the children's work schedules, nor anything about the kind of work these children performed on Telfair's estate(s).

Creole, which was not yet commonly spoken by Protestant preachers.<sup>76</sup> Rev. Denny also recorded information about catechists who were employed by Mauritian landowners. On the estate of Captain George F. Dick, the first British Auditor General to Mauritius, in the Plaines Wilhelms district (see Figure 1), bondspeople were taught to orally repeat the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and parts of the Scripture.<sup>77</sup> Catechists were also hired to impart religious instruction to the enslaved attached to the Governor's and the Chief Judge's respective country residences, and for those held in the *bagne* (jail and workhouse) in Port Louis. Increasingly, Protestant instruction for the enslaved was spreading to estates owned by other British colonial island authorities.

On Telfair's estates, some of his enslaved men were instructed in trades, including carpentry and masonry, and reportedly received lessons in mensuration and geometry from engineers and architects from England.<sup>78</sup> This was relatively uncommon, and was certainly not widely practiced by other Mauritian slaveholders. William Wilberforce Hume, superintendent of the "Boat-Establishment" (likely the harbour area) at Port Louis, declared that some enslaved men were apprenticed as "masons, carpenters, ship wrights, boat-builders, shoe makers, taylors [tailors], wheel-wrighters, blacksmiths, [and] coopers" on Telfair's estates, and that a large assortment of tools for each of these trades were shipped to the island from England.<sup>79</sup> In a letter dated 27 September 1826 addressed to Telfair, a Mr. Kyle of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Regiment wrote that when he was the "music-master" for his regiment, a few boys from the Bel Ombre estate who had been instructed in music were sent to Kyle in Mahébourg (a town in the southeastern part of the

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<sup>76</sup> Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery*, 67.

<sup>77</sup> Denny to Thomas, 19 June 1829. As well, on 22 December 1831, George Dick was appointed Colonial Secretary to the Governor of Mauritius. Later, he was president of the "Free Labour Association" that aimed to import indentured labourers to work on Mauritian plantations following abolition and following the refusal by the newly emancipated to remain on the plantations. See Campbell, *David Griffiths*, 927.

<sup>78</sup> Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery*, 71.

<sup>79</sup> Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery*, 205.

island—see Figure 1) for further musical training and apprenticeship. Such modern training for enslaved boys or men does not appear anywhere else in the archival records. These specialized forms of instruction would certainly have been above and beyond what other young enslaved men were learning, and far beyond the reach of enslaved women.

Furthermore, in the appendices of Telfair's published text, testimony from a man named Henry Chaloupe was included. Chaloupe entered Telfair's service as an enslaved Malagasy man in 1810, and was apprenticed out to Mr. L'Abbé Colin, the head priest in Île Bourbon, who had him instructed alongside "other domestics, apprentices, and slaves" in religious principles, as well as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Chaloupe declared that, with the money he earned working for Telfair, he was able to purchase his wife's freedom.<sup>80</sup> He also declared that he had one daughter, who was also instructed in one of Telfair's schools.<sup>81</sup> These are extremely rare examples of a slaveholder in Mauritius actively encouraging literacy, arithmetic, and in some cases, advanced trade and musical skills among his unfree labour force.

How were women and girls implicated in Telfair's educational schemes? In all, enslaved boys and men seem to have received more opportunities for learning than their female counterparts. Little mention is made of the practical skills in which bondsmen were instructed being taught to enslaved women and girls, though Telfair did mention that Governor Farquhar attempted to introduce silk-work and poppy cultivation to the island, "in the view of furnishing a light occupation to women and children."<sup>82</sup> Telfair also reported that unfree women on the island were frequently employed in net-making, mat-making, collecting leaves, and "the bruising of sugar lumps with small mallets," though there is no reference to these particular tasks being

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<sup>80</sup> Telfair paid his enslaved labourers with paper money that could only be used on his Bel Ombre estate. They could also establish a savings account with the estate's savings bank, which was run by the proprietor. In this way, enslaved labourers could theoretically save enough money to purchase their own freedom, or the freedom of family members. Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery*, 109.

<sup>81</sup> Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery*, 210.

<sup>82</sup> Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery*, 111.

taught to girls or women on his own estates.<sup>83</sup> Instead, women learned these and similar tasks domestically, likely from each other.

In fact, the instruction of girls is mentioned only a few times in the context of Telfair's estates. David Jones wrote that sixty boys and girls were taught to read, write, and to cast accounts, and were given religious instruction on the Bel Ombre estate.<sup>84</sup> Unfortunately, he never specifies how many of that number were girls. Similarly, Mrs. Telfair apparently established a girls' school at Bel Ombre, but there exists very little information about this school in the archives.<sup>85</sup> Ann Mary Berry, a friend of Mrs. Telfair's, wrote that every Sunday morning, the "little girls came into the veranda to make their curtsies to *Madame* [Mrs. Telfair]," who examined their clothes and hygiene, and gave each a portion of sugar. That evening, the girls sung hymns and were instructed in the catechism.<sup>86</sup> The practice of a missionary's wife receiving girls on her veranda was replicated in other slaveholding locations, as well.<sup>87</sup>

Overall, the archival record for Telfair and his estates remains rather silent about instruction for unfree girls, though there are enough hints to determine that he was instructing youth of both genders at least some of the time. In general, it appears that fewer enslaved, apprenticed, or poor, free girls attended school in Mauritius.<sup>88</sup> Though sewing, a common occupation for girls, was being taught in some mission schools by women schoolteachers, there is no indication that girls were being instructed in sewing on Telfair's estates. Religious instruction and learning from the catechism were deemed important for all enslaved labourers

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<sup>83</sup> Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery*, 156.

<sup>84</sup> Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery*, 179

<sup>85</sup> Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery*, 176.

<sup>86</sup> Anne Mary Berry to Mr. Chamberlain, 2 April 1827, appendix in Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery*, 173–4.

<sup>87</sup> Jeffrey Cox writes about this practice in his seminal work *The British Missionary Enterprise since 1700* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 161.

<sup>88</sup> We see this occurring in earlier documents for Le Brun's schools, and much later, into the 1840s, in Lady Mico's Charity schools.

and their children, and for the most part, only boys were given access to subjects or skills-learning beyond this. Unfortunately, the records do not more widely specify working patterns among the children, nor the specific types of employment performed by girls and boys, free and unfree, attending Telfair's classrooms or Le Brun's small schoolrooms. For example, did boys' work simply allow for more free time to pursue learning? Were girls so occupied that they simply could not be spared to attend class? These questions remain largely unanswered.

In a government document titled "List of Slaves who have been certified to the Protector as sufficiently instructed in the Religion they profess, to know the Nature and Obligation of an Oath," dated 25 June to 24 December 1829, eighty-three of the 115 slaves listed belonged to Telfair's estates.<sup>89</sup> They comprised men and women, between the ages of sixteen and sixty. Of that number, between twenty-eight and forty persons listed were women.<sup>90</sup> Apparently, before 1830, only 115 people—out of a total of some 50–70,000 enslaved in Mauritius—were listed as being "sufficiently instructed" to understand oath-taking. To be admissible to take an oath in a Christian court, a person had to be well-enough versed in Christianity to be able to swear to tell the truth on the Bible. Of the 115, only twenty-four *may* have attended mission schools. These numbers attest to the low attendance at missionary-run day, evening, and Sunday schools across the island. They likely also attest to the very low rates of literacy among the enslaved. Overall, Telfair's records offer a window into some gendered differences in slave education, as well as the types of instruction that slaveholders deemed important and appropriate for their enslaved workers.

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<sup>89</sup> Captain Dick is the only other estate owner directly named here, though 24 government slaves are also confirmed as sufficiently instructed. 25 June to 24 December 1829, PP (262), p. 685.

<sup>90</sup> Only names are given. Sex was not recorded. 28 names were certainly women's names, while up to 11 more *may* have been women's names.

## *Considering Violence and Slave Instruction*

It would be easy to position Telfair—as one of the only slaveholders permitting elementary and religious instruction on his estates—and Le Brun in a humanitarian light, for providing basic literacy and religious instruction to bondpeople. Yet, humanitarian sentiment and work are artificial when the oppressive structures remain in place.<sup>91</sup> Telfair was a wealthy land and slaveholder, colonial administrator, and scientist who benefitted economically from the slave trade for many years—it is important to remember this when considering religious instruction and skills-training. His devotion to these forms of slave instruction must be placed alongside the unarguable violence of slaveholding, including the physical violence and forms of punishment that did occur upon Telfair's estates, and the widespread fears among slaveholders of violence perpetrated by the enslaved themselves.

In fact, Telfair wrote that “blacks found quite incorrigible on other estates” as well as “insubordinate and vicious government apprentices” were sometimes sent to Bel Ombre (one of *his* estates) for “reformation.”<sup>92</sup> “Persons who have been born Slaves are natural enemies to labour,” Telfair argued; this belief in a racialized work ethic was coupled with the sheer violence inflicted against unfree labourers by numerous slaveholders. Telfair tried to make the case that, instead of threats and physical violence, religious and elementary instruction could be used to transform resistant enslaved labourers into happy, productive ones. This was believed by many missionaries and pro-slavery advocates throughout the nineteenth century on the peripheries of

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<sup>91</sup> Laura Madokoro, with permission. Roundtable Discussion at 2018 Indian Ocean World Centre Graduate Workshop on Forced Migration and the Environment (McGill University, Montréal, 6 December 2018).

<sup>92</sup> Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery*, 55.

the British empire.<sup>93</sup> However, there are also descriptions in Telfair's own accounts of bondspeople being placed in solitary confinement and in shackles, and being whipped for various offences.<sup>94</sup> Clare Anderson has written about an Indian convict rebellion on the Bel Ombre estate in 1817, which was triggered by a series of severe floggings and threats of corporal punishment.<sup>95</sup> There was also at least one complaint made to the Protector of Slaves about mistreatment on the Bel Ombre estate.<sup>96</sup>

Violence and disobedience perpetrated by the enslaved were widely feared in Mauritius, and Telfair was keenly aware of this. In the preface to his book, Telfair wrote that education schemes for his enslaved workforce had not been well-received by the white European community in Mauritius:

The only reproach I have experienced in this Colony, was, - *That the measures I put in practice, for the improvement of my Slaves, were calculated to produce a rapid, hazardous, and fearful revolution.* Some of the Planters complained, that I was adding the *irresistible power of intellect* to the preponderating physical force of the Negros, and sad consequences were predicated.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> For example, see Thomas Glasson, *Mastering Christianity: Missionary Anglicanism and Slavery in the Atlantic World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>94</sup> Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery*, 56–9.

<sup>95</sup> Clare Anderson, "The Bel Ombre Rebellion: Indian Convicts in Mauritius, 1815–53," paper presented at the workshop "Slave Systems in Asia and the Indian Ocean: Their Structure and Change in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries," (Université d'Avignon, France, 18–20 May 2000).

<sup>96</sup> *Protectors of slaves reports. Return to an address to His Majesty, dated 15 December 1830;--for, copy of any reports which may have been received from the protectors of slaves in the colonies of Demerara, Berbice, Trinidad, St. Lucia, the Cape of Good Hope and Mauritius, since the last similar reports presented to Parliament from each of these colonies respectively, 1830–31*, Parliamentary Papers Online, (262), 587.

<sup>97</sup> Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery*, ix.



Richard Allen has written extensively about planters' fears of maroon (runaway slave) communities on the island.<sup>98</sup> The above quote by Telfair offers a concise illustration of the racialized beliefs that underpinned the institution of slavery and fears related to emancipation. These are themes that are present throughout Telfair's writings, and that he attempts to use to distance himself from "cruel" French slaveholders. Unfortunately, Telfair's mistreatment of his own bondspeople tends to nullify his arguments.<sup>99</sup>

Telfair died on 14 July 1833, less than two years before emancipation in Mauritius. His writings offer rich material for studying the nature of slave education on the island. Yet, things began to radically change from 1832, with the arrival of more LMS Protestant missionaries to Mauritius, on-going hostility between French slaveholders and those connected to the anti-slavery movement, and eventually full emancipation from slavery in February 1835. As discussed in Part Two, the same concept of "civilizing" and rendering enslaved and newly emancipated peoples more productive via religious and elementary instruction underscored the implementation of "Negro Education Grants" in the British Caribbean and Mauritius under the apprenticeship system (1835–39).

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<sup>98</sup> Richard Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius* (Port Chester: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>99</sup> Anthony Barker writes about Telfair's economic gain from slavery and the contradictions between some of Telfair's statements and his actions related to the treatment of slaves, in "Reform Pretended: Cole and Telfair 1823–8" in *Slavery and Antislavery in Mauritius*, 43–52.

## ***Part Two***

### ***Imperial Education Schemes for Apprentices and Ex-Slaves***

The British House of Commons passed *An Ordinance in Council for Improving the Condition of the Slave Population of Mauritius* on 12 June 1829. Article VIII of this ordinance stipulated that slaveholders were to adopt “effectual measures” for the religious instruction of all enslaved peoples, and to “cause their slaves to be baptized and instructed in the Christian religion, within a reasonable time, under pain of an arbitrary fine.” The inhabitants of Mauritius were also instructed to allow all bondspeople to attend divine service on Sundays.<sup>100</sup> There is little evidence, though, that slaveholders took any major steps to implement these new policies. At the time, Le Brun was one of the few individuals offering elementary instruction to the enslaved population, which numbered between 50–70,000. Ramesh Ramdoyal, who has written extensively about slave education in Mauritius, argues that in the years immediately before emancipation, the attention of the anti-slavery elements of the British public, the Church of England, and various dissenting societies was focused primarily on Jamaica, Barbados, and elsewhere in the Caribbean. Few were concerned with Mauritius.<sup>101</sup> As discussed in Part One of this chapter, the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* targeted Mauritian slaveholders in 1829, to which Telfair responded with his own exaggeratedly rosy account of slavery in the island.

From 1830 onwards, the archival material hints that educational opportunities were being offered to both free and unfree peoples on the island at an accelerated rate. However, many issues remained. There was still little access to elementary education for enslaved girls and

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<sup>100</sup> *Return to an address of the Honourable the House of Commons, dated 3 June, 1829, for copy of the ordinance for the government and protection of slaves in the Mauritius; with the observations of the commissioners appointed to inquire, among other subjects, into the state of slavery, the condition of the slaves, and the means of relieving them, and encouraging free labour in that island; and more particularly into the condition of the slaves in the Mauritius, belonging to His Majesty's government, their employment, and the means of their instruction and emancipation*, 1829, Parliamentary Papers Online (PP) (338).

<sup>101</sup> Ramdoyal, *Development of Education*, 56.

women (and very gender-specific access to skills training, like needlework). Landowners and those with something to lose financially from the emancipation of slaves were still consistently hostile. In 1832, Le Brun reported that members of the Protestant church in Port Louis were still regularly “insulted” in the street as they attended or left the chapel.<sup>102</sup> Later, following emancipation and the end of the apprenticeship system (in 1835 and 1839, respectively), Le Brun commented darkly in 1840 on the “indolence and debased morals” of the emancipated peoples, and argued that since the “restraints of our former system of domestic control” (referring to enslavement and apprenticeship) had been lifted, “every rule of life and conduct is in danger of being shaken off from the minds of the lower class.”<sup>103</sup> This rhetoric was commonly applied throughout the 1830s and 1840s. Education was framed as a positive force that would “civilize” enslaved peoples, though violence towards unfree labourers prior to 1835 was still rampant on many estates.<sup>104</sup>

Formal emancipation occurred in February 1835, and the period from 1835 to 1843 was more prosperous for the newly freed population, despite the new apprenticeship scheme (1835–39). Under apprenticeship, formerly enslaved individuals were forced to act as apprentices for a specified term (normally six years) before they were permitted actual freedom of movement and work. This scheme was eventually cut short in 1839 by the British Parliament, as many contemporaries viewed it to be merely a “prolongation of slavery.”<sup>105</sup> With the introduction of the imperial “Negro Education Grant” and the arrival of Lady Mico’s Charity to Mauritius in 1835, more training and instructional opportunities opened up for the apprenticed and newly

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<sup>102</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/4/1: Report by Le Brun to the LMS, Port Louis, 22 August 1832.

<sup>103</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/2/4: Jean Le Brun, *Fourth Report of the Schools in Port Louis connected with the London Missionary Society, for the year 1840*, Port Louis, 1840.

<sup>104</sup> Protector of Slaves complaint registers from 1829 to 1832 demonstrate mistreatment of and widespread violence against the enslaved. See CO 172/27–33, NA.

<sup>105</sup> See Moses Nwulia, “The ‘Apprenticeship’ System in Mauritius: Its Character and its Impact on Race Relations in the Immediate Post-Emancipation Period, 1838–1879,” *African Studies Review* 21, no. 1 (1978): 89–101.

freed, including women and girls. Yet, the belief that formerly enslaved peoples required education to navigate “freedom” remained prominent in the archival documents for groups who actively promoted this instruction. Thus, up to 1843, there was a marked shift in *who* was offering religious and elementary education to apprentices and the newly emancipated, but not necessarily a shift in the reasons for *why* it was being offered. There were still economic interests at play, and a colonial desire to maintain a semblance of control over ex-slaves.

Similarly, the Mauritian branch of the “Ladies’ Society for Promoting the Early Education and Improvement of the Children of Negroes and of People of Colour in the British West Indies” met for the first time in January 1836 to discuss the state of education for apprentices. The board was composed of elite “gentlewomen,” including the first governor’s wife (Lady Robert Farquhar), the existing governor’s wife (Lady Charles Coleville), and the Slave Protector’s wife (Lady R.M. Thomas). The Society proclaimed that of the 70,000 apprentices in Mauritius, “not two hundred are receiving any instruction,” and that there were only four free schools for the use of the non-white population (all established by Rev. Jean Le Brun). Furthermore, it stated that:

Perhaps the most appalling proof of the ignorant state of the Apprentices is the fact that when the British and Foreign Bible Society asked for returns of the numbers of slaves who could read, and who would thereby be entitled to its gift of the Testament and Psalter, one Chaplain replied he knew of six while the other could name only four.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Methodist Missionary Society (MMS)/17/03/03/06/01/03: “Minutes of the Branch Association for the Mauritius of the Ladies’ Society for Promoting the Early Education and Improvement of the Children of Negroes and of People of Colour in the British West Indies,” Mauritius, 7 January 1836.

The Society acknowledged that the lack of slave literacy was the fault of planters who had refused education to their enslaved (and later, apprenticed) labourers, as well as the language barriers presented by Mauritius being a predominantly French and Mauritian Creole-speaking colony. The Society recommended that religious and moral instruction be made available to apprentices “as a most desirable preparative for entire freedom.” Many scholars have argued that the notion that ex-slaves required a period to “adjust” to freedom was merely a pretense used by colonial elites to justify instituting further unfree labour schemes, like apprenticeship contracts, so that planters would not suddenly lose their entire work force during a booming sugar export economy in Mauritius.<sup>107</sup> These economic concerns were coupled with a widespread fear that, if religious and elementary instruction were withheld from the enslaved, newly freed peoples would turn violently on former slaveholders, and desert plantation estates. In the late 1830s and early 1840s, as explored below, these became governmental concerns, as well.

### *Imperial Education Grants & Lady Mico’s Charity*

The British government was supporting elementary education and religious instructional schemes for the apprenticed classes and all newly freed slaves by 1836 in Mauritius, as well as in several other British colonies. The creation of the “Negro Education Grant” (here referred to as the “Education Grant” for the remainder of the chapter) is perhaps the strongest evidence of this. It was commonly believed by missionaries, planters, and the imperial government that ex-slaves needed to be “socialized” prior to being granted freedom.<sup>108</sup> Thus, the British Parliament established an initial education grant in 1835 whereby £25,000 was allocated annually for the

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<sup>107</sup> Richard Allen argues this in the context of Mauritius. Gwyn Campbell writes about this in the context of the Indian Ocean World more widely.

<sup>108</sup> Bacchus, *Utilization, Misuse, and Development*, 237.

education of ex-slaves in the British West Indies and Mauritius; this amount increased to £30,000 in 1841. Over the ten-year period (1835–45) in which the grant was active, approximately £235,000 was distributed, though unevenly. The imperial government initially intended these funds to be used solely to develop infrastructure—that is, for the construction of schools.<sup>109</sup> Missionary societies and local colonial authorities were expected to maintain these projects, and to assist with “the recurrent costs of providing such education.”<sup>110</sup>

In Mauritius, the funds from this parliamentary grant were distributed by the Trustees of Lady Mico’s Charity. The interdenominational Lady Mico’s Charity was established in 1670 by Dame Jane Mico, who bequeathed upon her death an annual sum of £2,000 to “redeem poor slaves” in the Barbary states, and directed that this sum be invested to yield an annual revenue. In 1835, the fund stood at £115,299, and seven new trustees were appointed to oversee its disbursement, which thereafter included the “furtherance of Negro education” in the Caribbean and Mauritius.<sup>111</sup> In addition to the early mission schools already established by Le Brun in Mauritius over the previous two decades, new buildings were erected and new teachers were trained to commence a new phase of imperial-funded schooling for apprentices.

In December 1835, Baron Glenelg, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, advised Mauritian Governor William Nicolay (g. 1832–40) to also immediately establish a Normal School in Port Louis to train “competent teachers from among persons resident in the Colony,”

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<sup>109</sup> Sir George Grey to Hon. J. Stewart, 21 July 1835, in *Correspondence in explanation of the measures adopted by her Majesty’s Government for defraying such expenses as may be incurred in providing for The Moral and Religious Instruction of the Emancipated Negro Population*, 14 December 1837, Parliamentary Papers Online, (15).

<sup>110</sup> Bacchus, *Utilization, Misuse, and Development*, 245. Ramdoyal has written about this education grant in Mauritius in *Development of Education*. Patricia Rooke has written about the grant in the context of the British West Indies, in “A Scramble for Souls: The Impact of the Negro Education Grant on Evangelical Missionaries in the British West Indies,” *History of Education Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1981): 429–47. Shirley C. Gordon has also written about its application in Jamaica, in “The Negro Education Grant: its Application in Jamaica,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 6, no. 2 (1958): 140–50.

<sup>111</sup> *Report of the Trustees of Lady Mico’s Charity*, Copy of a Despatch from Lord Glenelg to the Governors of the Windward and Leeward Islands, inclosing a Report from C. J. Latrobe, Esq., on Negro Education; together with a Schedule showing the Appropriation of the Parliamentary Grant of 1837, and a Report of the Trustees of Lady Mico’s Charity, House of Lords Papers, Parliamentary Papers Online, vol. 14, (257).

in accordance with the conditions governing the new education grant.<sup>112</sup> Three months later, Glenelg reported that the Trustees of Lady Mico's Charity in Mauritius would be given £1,000 towards the establishment of a teachers' training school in Port Louis, and £780 for the construction of new school houses for the instruction of recently freed slaves.<sup>113</sup>

At the same time, Le Brun was appointed "Agent and Superintendent" of the Normal Schools in Mauritius by the Charity trustees, and two Wesleyan missionaries, Messrs. Clark and Ollivier, and their wives, were also appointed to the island to take up teaching posts "for the education and the moral and religious improvement of the Apprenticed Labourers and their children."<sup>114</sup> The Charity's schools were to be entirely non-denominational, with "no catechisms or books of peculiar religious tenets to be taught in the schools," though students were still at liberty to attend divine service with their parents.<sup>115</sup>

However, the French-Catholic animosity that plagued Le Brun upon his arrival to Mauritius in 1813 had never entirely abated. In a letter dated July 1837, Le Brun wrote that his nomination to the superintendence of the normal schools had "created a little jealousy, not only amongst Catholic clergy, but I am afraid amongst the other clergy here and even his Excellency [the Governor]."<sup>116</sup> This animosity by government officials led to funds being cancelled and misplaced for many of Le Brun's Lady Mico's Charity-funded projects in Port Louis. In some cases, Catholic schools were purposely opened near Charity schools, and in at least two cases,

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<sup>112</sup> Baron Glenelg to William Nicolay, 10 December 1825, CO 167/227, NA.

<sup>113</sup> Baron Glenelg to William Nicolay, 30 March 1836, CO 167/227, NA. The actual sums needed to build, furnish, and maintain these new schools was much higher than the roughly £1,800 administered by the Charity. It is unclear whether these additional costs were meant to be covered by the Charity trustees, the London Missionary Society, or collected fees.

<sup>114</sup> *Mauritius Government Gazette*, No. 41, 8 October 1835, MSS Brit. Emp. S.20 E1/15, Weston Library, University of Oxford (hereafter WL).

<sup>115</sup> Appendix (E), "Regulations for the Government of Schools supported by the Mico Charity," *Report of the Trustees of Lady Mico's Charity*, vol. 14, PP (257), p. 166.

<sup>116</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/2/2: Le Brun to LMS, Port Louis, 5 July 1837,

the Charity schools were forced to close as a result.<sup>117</sup> Le Brun wrote that the Charity trustees gave him license to open branch schools throughout the island, and he intended to do so, with help from the two Wesleyan teachers, Clark and Ollivier, so that “we shall soon see this island covered with protestant schools and filled up with children who shall be brought up in the doctrine of the holy Bible and [...] affectionate to the British government.”<sup>118</sup>

Indeed, by May 1837, Ollivier had upwards of one hundred students registered at his Lady Mico’s Charity school in the Grand Port district, and he used a room in his own house for divine service twice every Sunday, and two to three times per week.<sup>119</sup> His colleague, Clarke, wrote that at the end of a regular school day, he dismissed the boys except for those who were kept back “for misbehaviour, and such as have distinguished themselves by good conduct.” The former were made to do “compulsory employment,” and the latter took “lessons in Drawing and English language, as a privilege.”<sup>120</sup> Clarke also reported that on Thursdays he instructed about twenty-seven children in La Saline. He attended a school in the Yolloff’s Camp every Friday evening, at which normally twenty children and several adults were present. Lady Mico’s Charity-funded education was thus benefitting from many of the Le Brun’s established networks.

In mid-1837, David Jones, former missionary to Madagascar, accompanied Le Brun on a short tour of northeast Mauritius. They visited estates in Piton, Mapou, Poudre d’or, Beau Mangier, Grand Port, and Trou aux Biches, meeting with landowners and visiting newly established schools (some of which were presumably Charity-funded). In Piton (see Figure 1), Jones recorded that there were sixty boys and girls attending one school, with eighty apprentices

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<sup>117</sup> Ramdoyal, *Development of Education*, 62.

<sup>118</sup> Le Brun to LMS, 5 July 1837.

<sup>119</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/2/2: David Johns to LMS, Port Louis, 22 May 1837. The colonial secretary and the governor actually opposed Ollivier and Clark preaching in their own homes, since the two had been hired as teachers (and not as preachers) under Lady Mico’s Charity and through the Negro Education Grant, which emphasized non-denominational instruction.

<sup>120</sup> MSS/S.20 E1/12-Government Papers/1835–37: George Clarke to LMS, Port Louis, 28 November 1836.



receiving religious instruction on Sundays. He wrote that a well-educated missionary who could teach in both French and English would be of merit to the school. Jones also reported that, in the Piton area, there were “many estates [...] upon which there are hundreds of apprentices and Indians.”<sup>121</sup> Later, in the village of Mapou, Le Brun and Jones were received by a Mr. Foster and his wife, who expressed the wish for a Lady Mico’s Charity school to be opened on their estate for the children of apprentices and the other children in the village. Le Brun “made arrangements” for a school to be commenced there within one month. Le Brun was likewise encouraged to establish schools in Grand Port and Beau Mangier, where hundreds, possibly thousands, of apprentices and indentured labourers were employed. At Beau Mangier, the late Charles Telfair’s nephew greeted them, and Jones reported that many of the apprentices there had in fact been his students nearly twenty years earlier.<sup>122</sup> The following year, in 1838, Jones returned to Mapou with Le Brun to examine the newly opened schoolhouse. They were both “delighted at the number of scholars there, their progress and the large congregation of the parents,” despite persistent opposition by a “popish priest” in the vicinity who continued to “prejudice the inhabitants.”<sup>123</sup> According to Ramdoyal, the Catholic clergy remained hostile towards Le Brun, the LMS, and Lady Mico’s Charity initiatives well into the 1840s.<sup>124</sup>

A Charity report for all colonies from 1 January 1838 to 31 July 1839 indicates that three schools were, by mid-1839, established in Mauritius at Port Louis, Mahébourg, and Piton. An addendum noted that three more schools had opened on the island after the report was compiled, though their locations were not given. The report also stated that three teachers were actively working in Mauritius, four more were en-route to the island, and an unknown number of “native

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<sup>121</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/2/2: David Jones to LMS, Port Louis, 20 September 1837. Jones reported seeing hundreds of apprentices at nearly every estate they visited in this part of the island.

<sup>122</sup> David Jones previously taught enslaved children and adults on Telfair’s estate at Bel Ombre in 1819 and 1820.

<sup>123</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/2/3: David Jones to LMS, Port Louis, 28 June 1838.

<sup>124</sup> Ramdoyal, *Development of Education*, 60.

teachers” were also employed.<sup>125</sup> These schools were primarily intended for the instruction of children from the newly emancipated population. The schools at Port Louis, Mahébourg, and Piton together housed 515 pupils: 172 boys, 88 girls, and 255 “adults.” The Piton school alone instructed 215 adults.<sup>126</sup>

Moreover, Jones wrote in June 1838 that the English planters and estate owners they encountered hoped to “persuade” their apprentices to send their children to these new schools, although there is little evidence of what this “persuasion” entailed. Perhaps apprentices already wished their children to receive elementary instruction, and once a school was erected, little extra persuasion was needed. This had certainly been the case for free people of colour.<sup>127</sup> Many planters were indeed keen to offer instruction to their apprenticed workforce, though the records fail to reveal *why* this might have been the case. Perhaps they, like the colonial authorities and missionaries in Mauritius, worried that apprentices needed to be “civilized” prior to acquiring full freedom. In any event, Lady Mico’s Charity schools were evidently making some headway in the north part of the island, and within other districts, too. Unfortunately, there is little evidence of how the pupils themselves perceived these initiatives, nor any indication of how apprentices felt about sending their children to these schools. Was education correlated with improved work opportunities? Most likely—to a degree. However, the records offer little direct evidence. These imperial-funded projects had similar intentions to the early mission schools on the island—that is, as a means of instructing primarily poor or unfree children (and sometime adults) of colour, and employing these forms of education to “temper” and “civilize” their behaviour.

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<sup>125</sup> *Report of the Trustees of Lady Mico’s Charity*, vol. 14, PP (257).

<sup>126</sup> I am unable to account for why such a high number of adults were being instructed at Piton in comparison with the schools in other locations.

<sup>127</sup> Ramdoyal, *Development of Education*, Part A.

As an interesting aside, the languages in which religious instruction and elementary education were conducted also served as a source of contention in this period. David Johns, another missionary to Madagascar who spent some time in Mauritius, who did not speak French, preached in Malagasy (though we do not know in which dialect) in Grand Port, to forty or fifty individuals, twenty-nine of whom also accepted English spelling books.<sup>128</sup> Teaching apprentices in languages beyond French, English, and Mauritian Creole was generally frowned upon by colonial authorities, including Governor Nicolay. For example, Nicolay told David Jones that he was not permitted to preach in any of the Malagasy dialects while he was in Mauritius. In addition, he dismissed Jones' recommendation that preachers be recruited from India who could speak the languages common to the South Asian population in the island, many of whom were indentured labourers.<sup>129</sup> Certainly, linguistic differences were intrinsic to the strong rivalry between Catholic and Protestant preachers and teachers on the island. To counter possible criticism from the Francophone community, most mission and Lady Mico's Charity instruction was conducted in English and French. Some scholars argue that European missionary work was often a vehicle for "intellectual conquest" and colonialism, and that this was partially achieved through Eurocentric language standardization.<sup>130</sup> This would certainly be a compelling avenue for future research in the context of British Mauritius.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/2/2: David Johns to LMS, Port Louis, 22 May 1837.

<sup>129</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/012/2: David Jones to LMS, Port Louis, 24 August 1837.

<sup>130</sup> For example, see the numerous scholars who contributed to the excellent volume *Colonialism and Missionary Linguistics*, eds. Klaus Zimmerman and Birte Kellermeier-Rehbein (Bremen, Germany: De Gruyter, 2015).

<sup>131</sup> My dissertation does not directly address multilingualism among the enslaved population. For more on creolization and language in Indian Ocean Africa, see Piers Larson, *Ocean of Letters: Language and Creolization in an Indian Ocean Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

### *Instruction for Women and Girls*

In 1835, a committee of colonial government officials, headed by P.D. Epinay, Attorney General and later Chief Judge in Mauritius, formed to examine the question of education in the island for emancipated and apprenticed peoples. It advocated that, in addition to the Lady Mico's Charity scheme, two schools be built in central Port Louis, with enough space to hold 300 boys and one hundred girls, as well as two schools in each of the "suburbs" to hold one hundred boys and fifty girls each.<sup>132</sup> Evidently, the committee planned on educating fewer girls than boys. The committee also suggested that students in the central boys' school be taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, and that should a student wish to study other subjects, a private arrangement be made by his family with the teacher, including payment of an additional fee. In all other schools in Port Louis and surrounding districts, elementary instruction was to be limited to reading English and French, the first four rules of arithmetic, and writing "so far as the formations of the letters of the Alphabet goes."<sup>133</sup> Committee members argued that teaching girls to write beyond this extent would be wasteful, "so far as the practical use of it would be concerned."<sup>134</sup>

Girls in the newly apprenticed and freed classes, then, were viewed by local colonial officials and missionary bodies as requiring very basic instruction, with needlework acting as the only additional training. This is demonstrated in a series of annual reports drawn up by Le Brun from 1837 onwards for the examinations of students at the mission schools in Port Louis and its

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<sup>132</sup> "System of Education" report, P. D'Epinay, 14 September 1835, CO167/227, NA. "Children" in this context were defined as those who were eight years old and younger. At least one "infants' school," for which very little information exists, was also proposed.

<sup>133</sup> "System of Education," 14 September 1835.

<sup>134</sup> "System of Education," 14 September 1835.

environs.<sup>135</sup> The needlework anecdote in the introduction of this chapter comes from the first annual report, in which forty boys and twenty girls sat examinations at two of the day schools in Port Louis. There were four mission schools open in this area, and the number of students registered for these schools increased each year.

In 1838, it was in needlework that the girls were reported to “have made the greatest progress.” Unlike the previous year, girls were also being taught (in 1838) to write numbers, and to perform basic addition.<sup>136</sup> Boys, on the other hand, were learning to read and write in both French and English, and being instructed in more advanced arithmetic. Le Brun noted that the parents of students were also attending Divine Worship twice a week in the schoolrooms, and that a noon-hour weekly Sunday school provided “Christian principles” to all the children.<sup>137</sup> Interestingly, the notion that parents might learn “good habits” from their children was also the impetus for the establishment of an Infants’ School. A government notice signed by Governor Nicolay in 1837 called for an Infants’ School to be built for the “labouring classes” so that children could be “early trained to good habits,” which they would then “reproduce upon the mothers.”<sup>138</sup>

A Committee of the Council of Government also issued a report in 1836 on “the education of the lower classes of Mauritius”—that is, children of newly freed and apprenticed labourers, as well as poor, free children of colour. The committee recommended that children in government schools be instructed in the first four rules of elementary instruction, and also in “the elements of agricultural science, or of those arts in which it may be deemed advisable to instruct

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<sup>135</sup> These reports are in reference to the original mission schools established by Le Brun in the 1810s and 1820s, not the new Charity-funded schools.

<sup>136</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/2/3: Le Brun, *Report of the Examination of the Mission Schools in Port Louis, for the Year 1838*, Port Louis, 1838.

<sup>137</sup> Le Brun, *Report of the examination of the Schools in the Camp*, 1837.

<sup>138</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01: Governor Nicolay, “Government Notice related to erecting schools and public establishments,” Port Louis, 27 June 1837.

a few of the most intelligent of the apprenticed labourers on every estate.”<sup>139</sup> Additionally, emphasis was placed on the education of children “in the bosom of their families,” rather than removing them to schools far from their homes, so that “the instruction imparted at the day and Sunday schools is then carried home and repeated.”<sup>140</sup>

Le Brun also reported on students in the Yolloff’s Camp who sat examinations in 1838. From the 1820s onwards, this suburb of Port Louis housed a high percentage of freed people of colour, largely of Malagasy descent. Repeating earlier rhetoric about the need to “civilize” certain populations on the island, Le Brun described the area as one where “vice and moral darkness reign,” and where parents attached no importance to the education of their children, and that consequently there had been a great need for him to establish a school and chapel there. Out of the twenty-three boys and twelve girls registered at this school, only two boys and two girls could read in French, and only five in total could spell, while the remaining children were still learning the alphabet.<sup>141</sup>

By 1841, the boys’ school in Port Louis had 130 registered students, with an average daily attendance of 105 (eighty-one per cent of those enrolled). Most of the boys were reading and writing at an advanced level, and reciting scriptures by memory. Six were capable of translating texts from French to English “with ease and facility,” and ten boys demonstrated an advanced understanding of grammar rules. In the second boys’ school in the eastern district of Port Louis, which had fifty-two boys enrolled, students were able to read and write in both French and English, and many were capable of analyzing and orally discussing English and

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<sup>139</sup> MSS/S.20/E1/12/1835-37: Enclosure in letter by William Nicolay, “Report of a Committee of the Council of Government, upon the education of the lower classes of the inhabitants and making observations thereon.”

<sup>140</sup> Nicolay, “Report of a Committee of the Council of Government.”

<sup>141</sup> Le Brun, *Report of the Examination of the Mission Schools in Port Louis*, 1838.

French grammar rules.<sup>142</sup> Advanced arithmetic, including compound division and multiplication, was also taught. Le Brun did report, however, that the school in the eastern suburb suffered from poor attendance, with “the children being kept at home sometimes for weeks together,” possibly due to a recent smallpox epidemic.<sup>143</sup> Overall, the education of boys of colour in Port Louis was advancing quickly by the early 1840s.

A somewhat different picture emerges for the education of girls. The 1840 report indicates that in the girls’ school, under a Mrs. Rohan, sixty-four students were enrolled. The school had an average attendance of fifty-three (eighty-three per cent), which was marginally higher attendance than the boys’ school. That said, a comparison of the student registration numbers for the boys’ school versus the girls’ school reflects that more boys (130 vs. 64) were, in general, registered for schooling. Further, little detail of the girls’ proficiency in reading, writing, or arithmetic was recorded, apart from a short paragraph stating that their studies progressed at a steady rate. However, a section on needlework *was* included. In this subject, the girls were “found to excel” and Le Brun reported that all needlework was being charged for, with the proceeds “divided equally between the [school] mistress, the scholars, and the school expenses.”<sup>144</sup> Girls were hardly being taught elementary instruction; instead, their time and energy was being put towards the production of marketable needlework. There were no comparable goods recorded as being produced by the boys. Sewing skills were certainly important for girls to acquire in this period, and this report highlights that this training was prized for girls in LMS mission schools above elementary instruction.

The next year, Le Brun’s 1841 report included a more thorough description of the girls’

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<sup>142</sup> It is not clear when precisely this second school in the “eastern camp” opened; it appears for the first time in Le Brun’s 1841 report for the mission schools in Port Louis.

<sup>143</sup> Le Brun, *Fifth Report of the State of the Mission Schools, Port Louis*, 1841.

<sup>144</sup> Le Brun, *Fourth Report of the Schools in Port Louis*, 1840.

progress in reading and writing, which was generally inferior to the progress made by the boys. In arithmetic, only four girls were capable of basic addition and subtraction. The girls continued to excel at needlework, however, and Le Brun wrote that “many mothers were delighted to see the work of their little girls exhibited in public view.”<sup>145</sup> Another girls’ school was opened in March 1841 in the eastern suburb (“camp”) of Port Louis, with the object of attracting, according to Le Brun, “a great number of little girls who are allowed, by the negligence of their parents, to roam around the camp without doing any work.” Unfortunately, with an enrolment of only thirty students, Le Brun was forced to suspend the new school for lack of attendance.<sup>146</sup>

On 31 March 1839, apprentices were formally emancipated, which brought huge changes to the island’s demographics, as newly emancipated peoples settled as free peasants and labourers, aggregating in Port Louis and forming new “rural hamlets” in the country districts.<sup>147</sup> In addition, one of Jean Le Brun’s sons, John Joseph Le Brun (Junior), stepped into his father’s shoes. By 1844, Le Brun Jr. had successfully started more mission schools in Moka and Plaines Wilhems districts, and was on track to open another in the Flacq district. He reported that the original boys’ and girls’ schools in Port Louis were still thriving, with over 327 children combined (126 of whom were girls). Le Brun Jr. also reported that the total number of scholars in the mission schools was 364.<sup>148</sup> This number only accounted for the students registered in the original LMS mission schools in Port Louis and a few others in the districts, like Rivière des Remparts, Plaines Wilhems, and Moka, and not the newly imperial-funded and Lady Mico’s Charity schools

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<sup>145</sup> Le Brun, *Fifth Report of the State of the Mission Schools, Port Louis*, 1841.

<sup>146</sup> Le Brun, *Fifth Report of the State of the Mission Schools, Port Louis*, 1841.

<sup>147</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/2/4: David Jones to LMS, Port Louis, 25 May 1840.

<sup>148</sup> CWM/LMS/13/02/01/3/3: John Joseph Le Brun (Junior) to LMS, November 1844.



established post-emancipation. Indeed, the “Negro Education Grant” was reduced in 1842, and fully terminated in 1845. Lady Mico’s Charity schools were handed to state authorities in 1843.<sup>149</sup>

### *Conclusion*

This chapter serves to draw connections between the activities of the London Missionary Society, the anti-slavery movement and its rhetoric, and early British colonialism in Mauritius. In a broader discussion of enslavement and apprenticeship, the actions and writings of individuals such as Jean Le Brun and Charles Telfair are central to developing an understanding of the conditions under which enslaved and poor free people of colour engaged in learning to read, write, or sew. Exploring the involvement of women and girls in mission schools highlights how some highly gender-specific, European domestic ideals, for example, were reproduced in the colonies.

Additionally, this chapter illustrates moments when colonial officials acted based on a perceived need to “civilize” groups of ex-slaves and apprentices. The imperial education schemes introduced to former slaveholding colonies were predicated on the notion that, without elementary and religious instruction, formerly bonded groups would be unable to properly socialize in a free society. Likewise, the apprenticeship system was put in place to disguise fears of economic collapse should all unfree labourers desert the estates once emancipated.

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<sup>149</sup> Ramdoyal, *Development of Education*, 67. Jean Le Brun passed away in 1865, ten years after the death of his wife, Coralie. He was succeeded by his three sons.

As demonstrated above, it is difficult to parse out the gendered experiences of the enslaved population. Men and boys were given more perceived advantages in terms of the subjects they were taught (some girls were not taught arithmetic, for example). Women and girls who attended school did receive elementary instruction, though their attendance numbers were consistently lower than that for men and boys in places where statistics for both groups were recorded. For the most part, slaveholders like Charles Telfair were more eager to develop trained craftsmen, and thus did not deem it economically worthwhile to offer the same advantages to girls and women. In addition, it is possible that the nature of women's labour—that is, working in the fields and in the home, and tending to children—rendered them less available to attend daytime or evening instruction. Missionaries and colonial bodies emphasized domestic training for women and girls, even though enslaved women historically performed both agricultural and domestic work in plantation settings.<sup>150</sup> They viewed bondspeople homogeneously as a group in need of “civilizing,” but also heterogeneously as men and women with inherently different strengths and gendered social roles.

With the end of apprenticeship in Mauritius in 1839, Governor Nicolay reported that “a great number of the large estates had been almost wholly abandoned” by former enslaved labourers.<sup>151</sup> While some newly freed individuals did agree to contract work with certain planters, they for the most part did not return to the sugar estates.<sup>152</sup> The same year, there was an increased arrival of indentured labourers to Mauritius, mainly from South Asia, to meet the labour shortage.<sup>153</sup> However, the rhetoric of enslavement, and the spaces and practices left

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<sup>150</sup> This was particularly true in the Indian Ocean World. See the introduction to Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph Miller, *Women and Slavery: Africa and the Western Indian Ocean Islands*, vol. 1 (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

<sup>151</sup> Nicolay to Glenelg, 4 May 1839, CO 167/210, NA.

<sup>152</sup> Anderson to Russell, 1 May 1840, CO 167/216, NA.

<sup>153</sup> Many scholars have written extensively about South Asian indentured labour to Mauritius. See Ashutosh Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017);

behind by the enslaved, would continue to influence the lived experiences of bonded indentured labourers well into the mid-nineteenth century.

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and Marina Carter's *Servants, Sirdars, and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995) and *Voices of Indenture: experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996).

## Conclusion

The marginalization of bondspeople in Mauritius and throughout the British empire did not terminate with the abolition of slavery. Although this dissertation ends in the early 1840s, legacies of enslavement persisted in the island well into the late nineteenth century and beyond. After 1835, most emancipated Africans moved away from the agricultural estates towards larger towns, ports, and the urban centre of the island, Port Louis. For many decades following the end of the apprenticeship system in 1839, free and unfree labourers and migrants from South and Southeast Asia arrived in Mauritius. Nearly two hundred years later, in 2018, Mauritius's population of mixed South Asian, Southeast Asian, African, and European descent is over 1.2 million. French and Mauritian Creole continue to be the island's dominant languages, though Hindi, Bengali, and to a far lesser extent, English, are still widely spoken.

The voices and accounts of enslaved women living in early British Mauritius have largely been absent from the literature on bondage in the western Indian Ocean world. This dissertation has systematically sought out narratives of women in slavery in the British colonial archives to fill this gap in the scholarship. In doing so, the stories of numerous women, including Sophie, Marie Saladin, and Elvina, have been brought to light. Their accounts illustrate the preoccupations and actions of enslaved women in early nineteenth-century Mauritius, including worries about motherhood and family, interactions with slaveholders and estate managers, and dialogues with colonial authorities, like the Protector of Slaves, and Protestant missionaries, like Reverend Jean Le Brun. Sometimes the women's accounts conflicted with those of the white elites around them. Extracting these stories and showcasing them, as this study has endeavored to do, sets the stage for future collaborative work between historians of the transatlantic slave trade

and the British World, and scholars who address gender and slavery in a wider global context.

When taken together, the interventions of colonial officials and residents—including the Commission of Eastern Enquiry (CEE), the Protector of Slaves and his district agents, Charles Telfair, Jean Le Brun, and members of the London Missionary Society and Lady Mico's Charity—illustrate that British authoritative figures in Mauritius were deeply preoccupied with the issue of slavery. Practices surrounding bondage informed colonial law in the island throughout the nineteenth century. British colonial authorities were concerned with the work patterns, behaviour, and instruction of enslaved men and women. Officials and their clerks spoke to bondspeople and recorded their accounts, intervened in disputes between slaves and slaveholders, modified laws to reflect the experiences of women in slavery, taught girls to read and sew in day schools, and attempted to instruct both free and unfree families in Christian principles.

In illuminating the accounts of unfree women and girls from the Mauritian colonial archive, several important themes arise concerning unfree labour, reproduction, maternity, and slave resistance. Chapter one, which examines the case of Sophie, an unfree woman accused of arson and theft while pregnant in 1823, highlights how doctors, slaveholders, and other British and French colonial authorities used racialized economic, medical, and legal terms in their depiction and understanding of pregnancy and motherhood. In the western Indian Ocean world, bonded women were valued for their productive and reproductive labour, which varied according to region and colony. In comparison with early nineteenth-century bondage practices in the Atlantic world, this study suggests that, in the 1820s, Mauritian slaveholders were not especially preoccupied with unfree reproductive labour. Strong pronatalist policies were uncommon, and pregnant enslaved women were not treated with particular care. Furthermore, slave complaint

records collected by the Protector of Slaves show that slaveholders commonly accused enslaved women, and more generally, women of colour, of being incompetent mothers. Their complaints of ill-treatment to the Protector and his agents were frequently delegitimized with accusations that the women in question were sexually promiscuous and prone to drunkenness.

New and old colonial slaveholding laws upheld or introduced in early nineteenth-century British Mauritius also impacted enslaved women and girls in unique ways. Ordinances related to slave pregnancy and motherhood were commonly enshrined in French legal codes like the *Code Noir*, some of which British colonial authorities nuanced. As Sophie's case reveals, shifts in colonial law served to escalate tension between French and British inhabitants in the island, and sometimes resulted in intervention by authorities in London. The new slavery amelioration measures introduced following the Commission of Eastern Enquiry's (CEE) investigation into Mauritian colonial governance also caused antagonism between British agents and the local French-Mauritian, land- and slaveholding elite. For example, the arrival in Mauritius of Richard Thomas, the Protector of Slaves, in 1829 precipitated many revisions to local slaveholding laws. Some of these changes directly impacted enslaved women and girls, and the new laws implemented by the Protector were generally intended to improve the living and working conditions of bondspeople. An in-depth examination of these changes in colonial law in the transition period from French to English rule in early nineteenth-century Mauritius would be a compelling future project.

In general, British colonial intervention in slaveholding was a dominant feature of early nineteenth-century island governance. In the 1820s and 1830s, cross-imperial tension with French-Mauritian inhabitants impacted many British projects in Mauritius, which in turn impacted the enslaved population. The CEE, in particular, represented an attempt by the

metropole to investigate and intervene in colonial governance and slaveholding practices in the peripheries of empire. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that while Thomas intended to reduce the harm inflicted upon bondspeople, the Protector simply perpetuated violent slaveholding practices. This was particularly true in cases where an unfree complainant was, sometimes wrongly, charged with defiant or resistant behaviour. Unfortunately, most slave protection offices and amelioration measures failed to provide protection to vulnerable groups, such as enslaved mothers and their children.

This dissertation also reveals important evidence of slave resistance in British Mauritius. Specifically, enslaved women *did* perpetrate acts of delinquency and resistance, and they also demonstrated strength, agency, and defiance in the face of violent Mauritian slaveholding practices. Acts of delinquency and subversion by unfree women were sometimes linked to pregnancy and motherhood, and a desire to protect and support themselves and their children. For example, Sophie's case in chapter one demonstrates that, while pregnant, she took certain actions to seek and procure resources and protection for herself and her new baby. The case also shows that colonial doctors were quick to link women's "bad" behaviour with pregnancy and maternity. Many other acts, such as verbal insolence and *petit marronage*, were also committed by women and girls, and appear frequently in the archive.

Many bondswomen made justifiable complaints of ill-treatment to the Protector of Slaves and his district agents, but the records hint that some placed false complaints—which prompts a reconsideration of the purpose of the Protector's office for bondspeople. While complaining of illegal corporal punishment and mistreatment at the hands of slaveholders, women also asked questions about the location of their family members and complained about the abuse of their children. These various motives for visiting the Protector's office—seeking information about

family and physical safety for one's children—were important and perhaps unintended outcomes of slavery amelioration measures in Mauritius. More broadly, the slave protection records show that, for bondspeople, leaving one's domestic dwelling or estate to visit a protection office and file a grievance was a form of resistance in its own right. This was especially the case when large groups of workers simultaneously abandoned their duties to register a complaint.

Such acts of defiance and resistance to bondage were linked more widely to the culture of violence that upheld slaveholding in Mauritius, as it did across Britain's colonies. This study strongly posits that all bonded people in Mauritius, including government-held slaves, recaptive Africans, and apprentices, experienced violence of some manner. Likewise, the Protector of Slaves' complaint records clearly illustrate how common it was for slaveholders to inflict physical violence on male and female bondspeople of all ages. Violence continued to occur in the 1830s and 1840s, well after the termination of the Protector of Slaves' duties, in settings where elementary and religious instruction for unfree peoples—and humanitarian language and sentiment—were widely applied.

Moreover, prior to formal emancipation in Mauritius in February 1835, "freedom" from bondage remained a nebulous concept for the enslaved. Manumission laws prior to 1830 were unclear and inconsistent, and an unfree person's path to obtaining freedom was strewn with visible and invisible obstacles. Civil status papers were not securely handled, and CEE findings show that residents who economically benefitted from slavery willfully deceived enslaved labourers, falsifying or destroying relevant documents, and renegeing on verbal agreements.

Contested freedom affected all bondspeople in the island, including women and children, recaptive peoples, and government slaves. Many unfree women tried to achieve manumission with the status and safety of their children in mind. In their turn, once recaptives and government



slaves landed in a port city, they were given no choice of occupation or employer, and were controlled by strict measures common to slavery. Government slaves experienced a high degree of violence, and many were quietly transitioned into chattel slavery. Even when their emancipation became financially advantageous for the Mauritian colonial government, bestowing freedom of mobility and employment to government slaves was viewed fretfully by white island residents. Indeed, for those in bondage in the early nineteenth-century western Indian Ocean world, freedom was difficult to attain. A future comprehensive exploration of affranchisement records for British Indian Ocean colonies and protectorates in this period would offer even stronger insight into manumission trends for bondspeople. Even free people of colour in Mauritius commonly experienced a great deal of discrimination and were subject to prejudicial race-based laws.

Prior to the eventual implementation of the Emancipation Act, Reverend Jean Le Brun and his fellow missionary educators and preachers instructed the enslaved in what constituted part of a wider imperial campaign to instruct colonized populations. Missionary conversion projects often overlapped and interacted with anti-slavery advocacy aimed at “ameliorating” the plight of bondspeople. These educational initiatives also served to appease white landowners and slaveholders who feared that, unless former slaves received Christian instruction and basic literacy, they would turn violently on their enslavers. In Mauritius, much of this Protestant educational and religious endeavour antagonized the French-speaking Catholic majority who linked Le Brun’s presence and early mission schools with the broader anti-slavery imperial project, and were thus hostile towards them. Throughout the 1830s, the belief that formerly enslaved peoples required education and Christianity to navigate “freedom” remained prominent in missionary records. Up to 1843, after emancipation and the cessation of the apprenticeship

scheme, there was a marked shift in *who* was offering religious instruction to the newly emancipated and apprenticed classes, but not necessarily a shift in the reasons for *why* this instruction was being offered. With these same “civilizing” principles in mind, Lady Mico’s Charity and the imperial “Negro Education Grant” supported elementary education and religious instruction for former apprentices and all newly emancipated slaves in Mauritius and in many other British colonies.

On this subject, too, the archives yield compelling information about enslaved and newly emancipated women and girls. Charles Telfair, Governor Farquhar, and many missionaries visiting or living in Mauritius adopted the popular imperial rhetoric of “domestication” when it came to instructing unfree women and girls in the island. In many British colonies, white inhabitants did not commonly permit instruction for enslaved workers on their estates, but where education was offered, indigenous women and women of colour received an education distinct from that given to their male counterparts. Whereas basic literacy, numeracy, religious instruction, and skilled trades were taught to the boys, girls learned basic literacy in English, religious instruction, and sewing. In Mauritius, enslaved men and boys received greater educational and skills-training opportunities than their female counterparts. However, from 1830 onwards, the archival material hints that some unfree girls *were* offered greater educational opportunities. For the future, a comparative overview of missionary instruction practices in Mauritius, the Seychelles, and Île Bourbon (Réunion) would almost certainly shed more light on gendered educational practices for enslaved and newly emancipated peoples in these islands.

In effect, the stories of slavery told by Elvina, Sophie, Marie Saladin, Nina, and Catherine, to name a handful of the women whose accounts populate this dissertation, are crucially important to modern slavery studies and historical research into Indian Ocean world

bondage. The narratives of contested freedom, abuse, marronage, pregnancy, motherhood, and learning recounted in this project represent only a fraction of the accounts retrievable in the Mauritian colonial archive. Relegated to the appendices and margins of colonial reports that sit in archives throughout Britain's former empire, these women's complaints, grievances, frustrations, and successes fall to us—twenty-first century scholars in privileged academic positions—to highlight and publish. The histories of women of colour who suffered under Western domination and colonialism must be sought out and retold, to push back against the repressive forces of patriarchy and racial discrimination that, globally, continue to define the lived experiences of women and girls.

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