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Doris Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005. xvi + 412 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$89.95 (cl). ISBN 0-8223-3453-4; \$24.95 (pb). ISBN 0-8223-3465-8.

Review by Jeremy D. Popkin, University of Kentucky.

Doris Garraway's exploration of the literary representations of the French Caribbean before the Haitian Revolution is a provocative addition to the rapidly growing scholarship on France overseas and the writing it has produced. Garraway argues that these texts represented the development of a distinctive creole identity, defined in opposition to the *métropole*, but she challenges the frequent assertion by post-colonial critics that this process represented a true hybridization of white European elements with contributions from the cultures of the African and mixed-race populations of the islands. Pre-revolutionary creole culture, Garraway contends, reflected the relations of domination that existed in these slave colonies, and in particular the definition of the colonies as a space of libertinage, outside of the *métropole's* systems of social and sexual control. "The 'libertine colony' thesis thus offers a means of understanding the centrality of desire and sexuality to notions of white Creole identity and political legitimacy in Saint-Domingue, as well as the concrete effects of such desires," Garraway writes (p. xiv).

The Libertine Colony is organized as a series of essays on particular texts and themes, rather than a comprehensive survey of pre-revolutionary writing about the colonies. The publications Garraway considers date from the 1640s, soon after the start of French colonization in the Caribbean, to the 1790s, when the insurrections of black slaves and free people of mixed race in Saint-Domingue destroyed the colonial order in France's most important overseas possession. Her study employs a broad notion of literature, exploring genres such as missionary relations, travel accounts, novels, dictionaries, tales of piracy, and Moreau de Saint-Méry's encyclopedic *Description...de la partie française de Saint-Domingue*, compiled before the Revolution but published only after its outbreak. Scholars of Francophone literature, she contends, have neglected these publications, both because so few of them fit conventional definitions of literature and because they cannot easily be adapted to the currently popular notion of creolization as a process in which subaltern groups are able to exert a positive influence. Most have also been excluded from the canon of French literature, but, Garraway argues, they reflect outlawed impulses that did eventually find their way into metropolitan writing. The Marquis de Sade's fantasies, she suggests, may well have been modeled on stories of sexual cruelty set in the colonies (p. 26).

Although Garraway's title suggests a focus on themes of sexuality and desire, her study is not limited to these issues. She devotes a chapter to French writings about the seventeenth-century encounter with the Caribs, a European term for the original inhabitants of the Antilles that this group adopted for itself, and another to descriptions of what she calls the "white noble savage"—the pirates and early settlers in the islands. A third chapter deals with the role of religious difference in representations of the colonies, including a discussion of a little-known novel that probably introduced the notion of the zombi to the western world. Two final chapters explore representations of interracial sex and its consequence, the creation of a population of mixed ancestry.

Throughout the book, Garraway's readings of her sources are imaginative and thought-provoking. She shows that the missionary Raymond Breton's Carib dictionary, for example, represented an effort to facilitate the conversion of the population, but at the same time, Breton's appreciation of the pronounced difference of Carib language and culture "ironically subverts this display of colonial mastery" by

enabling the Caribs, in a sense, to speak for themselves (p. 87). Her reading of Oexmelin's pirate stories shows that these tales of swashbuckling lawlessness were nevertheless integrated into the process of absolutist state-building, as their conquests were shown to favor French colonial projects: "The *Histoire des aventuriers* offered French subjects of all social ranks an imaginary ground of transgression—distanced in both time and space—onto which they could project their own desires for savagery and aggression without threatening the prerogatives of the absolutist state" (p. 119). The 1697 novel *Le Zombi de Grand-Pérou* depicts colonial whites appropriating the magical beliefs of their African slaves, which, as Garraway reminds us, were not so distant from the witchcraft fears of many seventeenth-century Europeans.

In her two chapters about the sexual interactions of white men and women of African descent, Garraway tries to explain how colonial society could both attempt to enforce racial segregation and yet recognize interracial sex as a constant aspect of its day-to-day reality. Rather than seeing this as a contradiction, Garraway argues that it was the ultimate demonstration of white male power. By shifting the moral stigma of these encounters onto the women and their mixed-race children, and especially onto the supposedly irresistible "mulatto Venus," white authors "provided a safe means by which to figure the irrepressible reality of interracial sex. At the same time, such images allowed whites to repress the often drastic power asymmetries that facilitated their sexual hegemony in the colony" (p. 232). Furthermore, the fact that these women of mixed race were identified as the offspring of white males—these literary representations excluded the possibility of white women bearing children with black men—meant that white desires for them had an incestuous element, which, for Garraway, becomes the central symbol of the evil of slavery: "it is the enabling of incest in a slave society that epitomizes the radical social violence of the institution" (p. 282). Representations of colonial life thus expose white desire to create a creole world in which the most basic element of the civilized social order—the incest taboo—was abolished.

Garraway is aware that historians will immediately ask themselves whether the texts she interprets so provocatively in fact reflect the reality of life in the French colonies. She is not claiming that white men literally had sexual relations with their own mixed-race daughters, but rather that the way whites, and particularly Moreau de Saint-Méry, wrote about the results of interracial couplings tells us something about the impulses underlying the slavery system. More generally, she is arguing for an approach to the past that goes beyond what is explicit in the sources. "There are many questions about cultures that historians do not or cannot ask and literary scholars can," she writes. "In my view, literary interpretative strategies offer the most powerful means of probing the ideas, beliefs, power relations, anxieties, and fantasies of a society through the partial accounts left in its cultural narratives" (p. 16). She is well aware that the texts she studies are anything but transparent depictions of colonial life; among other things, as she emphasizes, they rarely describe slavery directly and never dwell on its naked cruelty.

The history of representations is a well-established genre by now, but the very power of Garraway's arguments underlines the importance of asking questions about what one might call the "representativity" of these representations. It is odd that her corpus omits Raynal's *Histoire philosophique des deux Indes*, whose first edition appeared in 1770, and which was probably the most widely read book about pre-revolutionary colonial life and one that, despite its many internal contradictions, did contain gruesome descriptions of slavery.

When one compares *The Libertine Colony* with recent work on French colonialism by scholarly historians, one becomes aware of how differently certain issues can appear when viewed through different disciplinary lenses. Whereas Garraway implies that encounters with racial others in the Caribbean were a major theme in French culture during this period, James Pritchard's recent *In Search*

of *Empire: The French in the Americas, 1670-1730* reminds us that there were only 32,000 Europeans in the French Caribbean colonies as of 1730. Colonization, in his view, was a thoroughly peripheral enterprise, of little concern to the vast majority of the metropolitan population.[1] Similarly, whereas Garraway reads the interracial encounters of white men and women of color as evidence of unmentionable desire and gendered oppression, Stewart King's *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-Revolutionary Saint-Domingue*[2] emphasizes the economic autonomy of many of these women, who frequently owned more property than their white partners, and their success in steering their children into legally recognized marriages. In 1791, Julien Raimond, the most prominent spokesman for free people of color from the colonies in revolutionary Paris, would protest that women from his group were better off than men, precisely because of their chances of marrying whites.[3]

Historians thus continue to emphasize the economic and political motives behind French colonization, and the relative success of the free colored group in consolidating itself in Saint-Domingue despite white racism.[4] Garraway's exploration of the literature of pre-revolutionary Caribbean colonialism nevertheless adds an important dimension to our historical understanding of this subject. Representations and even outright fantasies are part of the historical past, along with economic realities and political institutions. Garraway demonstrates how psychologically fraught the French encounter with the Caribbean was, even if those who encountered these texts were a minority of the reading public, which was in turn a minority of the population. She also shows that a vision of creolity—of a distinct colonial identity—had taken shape before the revolutionary era, and that Haiti, the other French islands in the region, and metropolitan France all inherited this cultural legacy from the period of slavery. *The Libertine Colony* is an important contribution to the efforts currently being undertaken in history and other disciplines to understand how the French *métropole* and its empire have interacted and affected each other over the course of the past four centuries.

NOTES

[1] James Pritchard, *In Search of Empire: The French in the Americas, 1670-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 421.

[2] Stewart King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-Revolutionary Saint-Domingue* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2001).

[3] Julien Raimond, *Observations sur l'origine et les progrès [sic] du préjugé des colons blancs contre les hommes de couleur* (Paris: Belin, 1791).

[4] Two important forthcoming contributions to the historical literature in this field are John Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006) and Malick Ghachem, *The Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

Jeremy Popkin
University of Kentucky
popkin@uky.edu

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