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Bronwen Crawford Boyd April 10, 2022

Ceci n’est pas une signare:
Locating Women in Nineteenth-Century Urban Coastal Senegal Using French Representations of the Signares

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Abstract

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This project analyzes a particular group of *métis* (racially and culturally mixed) women called the *signares* to map out French treatments of race, gender, and class in nineteenth-century urban coastal Senegal and to locate Black slave women within these very same communities. The *signares*' proximity to white French men as their wives and to Black slave women as slave owners and women of color lends them the unique ability to shed light on both the French colonial project and Black slave women's histories. Through French drawings, ethnographies, travelogues, and a feuilleton series, this thesis treats colonial depictions of the *signares* as inscriptions of French biases towards race, gender, and class. The French attitudes revealed by these analyses are then used to map out the social, economic, and ideological spaces Black slave women occupied before and after the inflection point of abolition in 1848. This project does not claim to reconstruct Black slave women's voices, nor does it purport to reconstitute the signares', but it does clarify the race, gender, and class hierarchies women of color inhabited in urban coastal Senegal across the nineteenth century.

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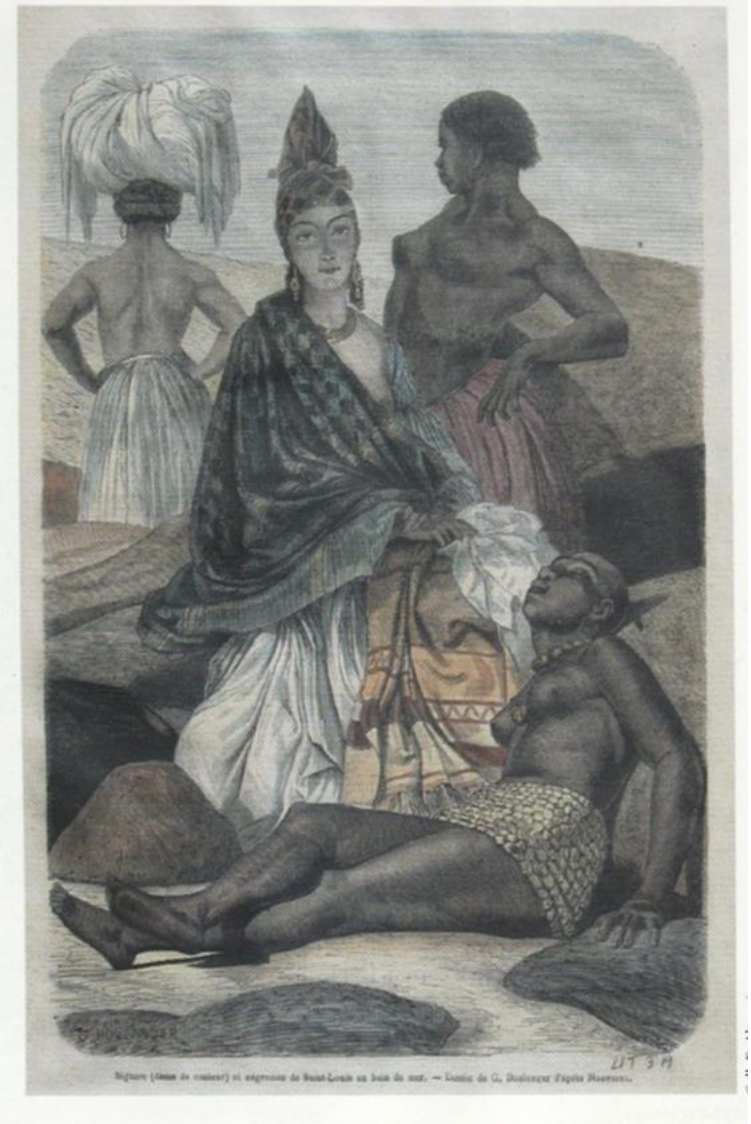

Figure 1. Signare (dame de couleur) et négresses de Saint-Louis au bain de mer[1].

Over one hundred years ago, this engraving revised by Gustave Boulanger surfaced in an unknown publication in Paris. To the modest French sensibilities of the late nineteenth century,

[1] Figure 1, Nousveaux, Edouard Auguste and Gustave Boulanger, "Signare (dame de couleur) et négresses de Saint-Louis au bain de mer," engraving, 1891, In *Trésors de l'iconographie du Sénégal colonial*, by Xavier Ricou, Figure C10, Paris: Riveneuve éditions, 2007.

what—or rather, *who*— is portrayed would have come as a shock. We see Black women with bare breasts, writhing bodies, and spines contorted to emphasize the dark contours of their muscles. Their faces are turned away from the audience, accentuating their sexualized bodies. One woman even tilts her head back in seeming erotic bliss. The figure in the middle provides a stark contrast: her direct eyes, the ample folds of her luxurious clothing, and the headdress balanced high on her head lend her the air of a sophisticated lady. Her complexion is luminously white compared to the women around her—so light, in fact, that her cheeks are devoid of any natural flush. Only the suggestion of her left breast disturbs the impression of her reserved elegance. This image immediately raises multiple questions: who are these women, and why are they so harshly contrasted? Why would an image like this be published in metropolitan France, especially considering the more modest sensibilities of the era?

This engraving, published at the very end of the nineteenth century, was the product of profound ideological shifts in the French colonial imagination. In urban coastal Senegal, these ideological shifts, economic crashes, trade reformations, the spread of Catholicism, and the abolition of slavery defined this century as one of intense turmoil—especially for women like the ones pictured above. The *signares*, represented by the luminous woman in the center of Figure 1, were particularly enmeshed in these changes as property owners, traders, and slave owners.[2] However, in contrast with the portrait above, these women were famously known for being *métis*. *Métis* identity, or *métissage*, refers to the characteristics of racial and cultural mixing. The *signares' métissage* manifested in their racial, ethnic, and social connections to Black Africa and white France as African women of color married to white European men, mothers to *métis*

[2] George Brooks, "The *Signares* of Saint-Louis and Gorée: Women Entrepreneurs in Eighteenth-Century Senegal," in *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, ed. Nancy Hafkin and Edna Bay, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1976), 20.

children, and owners of other Africans. Thus, the *signares' métissage* strengthens their connection to the major historical events of nineteenth-century urban coastal Senegal—and certainly the effects these events had on them. Though the first generations of the *signares* in the eighteenth century were usually Black women, the *signares* of the nineteenth century were primarily mixed-race women who acquired significant social and economic power through their marriages to white European men. Despite generations of *signarial* partnerships with white men, however, it is unlikely that a *signare* would ever have had a complexion as light as the one featured in Figure 1. How, then, can we understand this engraving in the context of the tumultuous nineteenth century? How can we comprehend the *signare's* relationship with the Black women around her and, moreover, with the French audience that consumed her image?

The *signares'* locations at the crossroads of Black Africa and white France allow them to shed light on each of these questions. As traders and property owners, the *signares* were directly impacted by the installation of resident French merchants in 1817 and the reformation of trade from gum arabic to peanut cultivation in the 1840s. As mothers to *métis* children, slave owners, and women of color themselves, they were heavily affected by the racial rhetorics of the Catholic *mission civilisatrice*, and the abolition of slavery in 1848.[3] By tracking their positions in the urban coastal communities of Saint Louis and Gorée across each of these historical events, this project uses the *signares'* social and economic positions throughout the nineteenth century to expose the formalization of the French colonial agenda in nineteenth-century urban coastal Senegal. This thesis also analyzes how *signares* were represented in French colonial art and texts to elucidate the calcification of French ideas about race, gender, and class in the nineteenth century. The *signares'* proximity to Black slave women, in turn, allows us to clarify Black slave

[3] *Mission civilisatrice* is French for "civilizing mission."

women's positions within these historical events and French ideologies throughout this same period.

One of the greatest tragedies of the historical record on urban coastal Senegal is the erasure of the *signares'* and Black slave women's voices from the archive. No known documents written or illustrated by these women exist, thus barring us from hearing their direct voices. In Black slave women's cases, this erasure also manifests in their reduction to generalized, stereotyped forms in colonial art and texts that fail to tell us anything about actual slave women. Unfortunately, the erasures of Black slave women in colonial histories have bled into the contemporary literature, where these women are mistakenly treated as actually silent and absent in lived history. Abena Busia describes this as the "double-silencing" of Black African women in the "master's texts"; Marisa Fuentes articulates it as receiving colonial documents as they were written by colonial actors.[45] In contrast, the *signares* are comparatively well-represented in nineteenth-century French documents, featuring in approximately twenty known portraits and numerous texts like ethnographies and travelogues.[6] This prevalence in primary documents has also translated into a large body of work on the *signares* in the secondary historiography, where famous *signares* like Cathy Miller, Kati Wilcok, and Marie Paul Bénis are analyzed as individuals with faces, names, and unique stories.[7] The *signares* did not escape stereotypes or generalizations in the colonial archive, and some of these generalizations are still accidentally transcribed into the contemporary literature. However, due to their relative prevalence in the

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[4] Abena Busia, "Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female," *Cultural Critique*, No. 14, (1989): 86.

[5] Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 5.

[6] Xavier Ricou, *Trésors de l'iconographie du Sénégal colonial*, (Marseille: Riveneuve éditions, 2007), 52.

[7] Hilary Jones, *The Métis of Senegal: Urban Life and Politics in French West Africa*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 19, 20.

historical record, analyzing the *signares* for French perspectives on race, gender, and class in nineteenth century urban coastal Senegal can also help to challenge the perpetuation of Black slave women's silences in contemporary research.

The methodology for this project can be boiled down to three primary steps: first, evaluating the extensive secondary literature on the *signares* for context on the most important historical developments in French colonialism; second, reading French representations of the *signares* for their implications about race, gender, class, and the ideological landscape they inhabited; and third, using this ideological landscape to understand how Black slave women's positions in colonial society and in the French imaginary changed or remained the same over the course of the nineteenth century. This process first requires the provision of extensive historical and theoretical context, including economic and social histories of urban coastal Senegal, Black feminist and intersectional theories on race, gender, and class, and a background on French ideologies towards race and gender in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Building on this context, French lithographs, ethnographies, travel stories, and newspaper columns portraying the *signares* are read for their logics on race, gender, and class in the nineteenth century. These logics are then mapped out in reference to the economic, social, and ideological histories of urban coastal Senegal to demonstrate how French ideas of race and gender changed over the course of the century. Finally, representations of Black slave women's *relationships* with the *signares* are interrogated in the context of French ideologies on race, gender, and class to locate these women in urban coastal society and in the French colonial imagination across the nineteenth century.

This process is broken down across three chapters. The first chapter focuses on providing historical context, defining who the *signares* were, exploring their *métissage*, and clarifying what

happened to them across the inflection point of abolition and economic reformation in the mid-nineteenth century. Multiple major historical events are highlighted over the course of the chapter, including the arrival of Catholic missionaries in 1817, the gum crisis in the 1840s, the abolition of slavery in 1848, and French imperial expansion in the 1850s. Two primary debates in the contemporary research on the *signares* take the forefront here: were they collaborators or sexual entrepreneurs? Did they experience a clear downfall following the abolition of slavery, or did they retain their power into the twentieth century? The first debate was discussed thoroughly in scholarship from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries during a push in historical studies to center marginalized identities in research and avoid framing history in terms of grand structures (capitalism, etc.).[8] While attempting to point out *signarial* agency and depart from the Manichean oppressor versus oppressed narrative, this dichotomy ignores the complexity of existing within a colonial system and overemphasizes *signarial* sexuality. The collaborator versus sexual entrepreneur dichotomy perpetuates the hypersexualization of women of color's bodies begun by European colonial powers themselves. Even more, it implies *signarial* self-definition and agency on the basis of the same oppressor versus oppressed narrative it tried to escape: either the *signares* could collaborate or assimilate with the French oppressor, or they could resist in one way and one way only—sexually. This thesis adopts a more nuanced approach to understanding *signarial* sexuality, agency, and resistance that rejects their relegation to either the "collaborator" or the "sexual entrepreneur" categories in much of the contemporary scholarship. Eschewing reductive dichotomies for the *signares* also opens up a more nuanced way to understand Black slave women's positions in the same communities in Chapter Three.

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[8] Christoph Conrad, "Social History," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes, (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001), accessed September 11, 2021, https://www.academia.edu/679646/Social_History. Chapter One details this debate between scholars like George Brooks, Hilary Jones, and Robin Hardy.

The second debate considered in Chapter One has been addressed by various scholars since the 1980s like George Brooks (1976, 1980, 2003), Hilary Jones (2013), and Robin Hardy (2016). Brooks argues that the *signares* not only saw a decline following abolition, but they "shared the same indignities and humiliations as other Africans…"[9] Conversely, Jones posits that the *signares* did not see an overall decline but instead experienced a conversion of their economic power as traders and slaveowners to social power as the models for morality and decency in the colony.[10] Both of these contentions have their merits, with Brooks acknowledging abolition's economic repercussions and Jones pointing out the importance of *signarial* social capital, but neither consider the nature of that social capital nor its implications for the French colonial project. This paper argues that the social power the *signares* maintained in the late nineteenth century cannot be divorced from the colonial system which permitted and prescribed the limitations of that power. An analysis that centers race, gender, and class while still considering the colonial landscape the *signares* inhabited demonstrates that the *signares* did exercise agency in fighting for their prominent positions in urban society, but the things they were allowed to do with that agency were heavily dictated by French ideas and agendas.

Building on the historical context provided in Chapter One, Chapter Two clarifies these French ideas and agendas using artistic and written portraits of the *signares*. The distinction between representation and reality plays an especially important role here. Artistic and written portraits of the *signares* are not taken to *be signares*, but rather colonial *constructions* of what French men believed about the *signares*. Thus, each representation of a *signare* is not a *signare*, it is the inscription of French beliefs about race, gender, and class at that given point in the

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[9] George Brooks, "Artists' Depictions of Senegalese Signares: Insights Concerning French Racist and Sexist Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Swiss Society of African Studies* 18, no. 1 (1980), 82.
[10] Jones, *The Métis of* Senegal, 51-52.

nineteenth century on a visual or textual surface.[11] By drawing out these beliefs from twelve different French sources from across the nineteenth century, we can piece together the evolution of French ideologies on race, gender, and class as they correspond with the biggest historical events detailed in Chapter One. The "Une Signare" feuilleton series from *La Presse* is central to this endeavor. Published in a Parisian newspaper in 1841, "Une Signare. I-III" exemplifies French attitudes towards race, gender, and class through its treatments of *mariage à la mode du pays* and *signareship*.[12] This fictional narrative is particularly revealing because it was published at a critical juncture in colonial history in urban coastal Senegal: in the midst of the economic crash of the 1840s, seven years before the abolition of slavery in 1848, and a decade before the French imperial expansion into the interior of Senegal. Thus, the "Une Signare" series captures a snapshot of French social anxieties as its colonial administration scrambled to stabilize its economy and maintain a firm hold of the Senegal colony. At the confluence of military imperialism, economic reform, and legal revolution, the "Une Signare" feuilleton series serves as a time capsule for French perspectives and agendas in Senegal's rapidly changing colonial landscape.

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[11] This is where the title for my thesis comes from. René Magritte was a Belgian surrealist painter who created the famous work "The Treachery of Images." This painting shows a starkly clear image of a pipe with the caption "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" or in English, "This is not a pipe." Magritte humorously explained: "The famous pipe. How people reproached me for it! And yet, could you stuff my pipe? No, it's just a representation, is it not? So if I had written on my picture 'This is a pipe', I'd have been lying!" Harry Torczyner, *Magritte, ideas and images*, (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1977), 71. Of course, Magritte's response is ironic, but the surrealist juxtaposition of representation versus rational reality plays a far less humorous and ironic role in my work.

In this project, images of the *signares* are understood not as *signares* in themselves, but as French representations of *signares*. Could we speak to or hear the *signares* directly? No, because these images are representations of the signares by white French men, not a real *signare*. Thus, *Ceci n'est pas une signare*. In creating realistic images of the *signares*, French artists and writers inscribed their *beliefs* about the *signares*, but by situating these lies in the historical context from the first chapter, we can draw out French ideas on race, gender, and class from each portrait.

[12] *Mariage à la mode du pays*, or "country marriages," were the marital arrangements between French men and the *signares* founded on Wolof marriage customs.

Chapter Three locates Black slave women within these historical events and developing ideologies by analyzing portraits of these women in relation to the *signares*. This section revisits many of the sources in Chapter Two with particular attention to what the differential positioning, lighting, clothing, and racial presentation of Black slave women vis-à-vis the *signares* says about Black slave women's locations within the developing French colonial project in urban coastal Senegal. Again, representations of Black slave women are not taken to be Black slave women, but rather reflections of French beliefs about race, gender, and class as they pertain specifically to Black slave and freed women.

Ultimately, the *signares' métissage* at the intersection of Black Africa and white France allows us to analyze both the French colonial project in Senegal and the Black slave women within it. The *signares'* struggles to maintain their social and economic power in the face of socioeconomic upheavals across the nineteenth century clarify the formalization of French ideas of race and gender as part and parcel of the emerging French colonial agenda in Senegal. Analyses of their relationships with Black slave women corroborate the idea in the contemporary scholarship that Black slave women did not really become free after abolition, but they add a critical new perspective on the colonial ideological landscape: Black slave women were pushed further down in the French colonial hierarchy *after* the abolition of slavery, with the calcified *métis* class above them limiting their options for social mobility despite their statuses as legally free women.

Chapter One: Context, Colonialism, and Controversy on the Signares of French Senegal

In July of 1841, an unnamed author signing as "A. Jal" published a three-part feuilleton series titled "Une Signare" in the Parisian newspaper, *La Presse*.[13] They told the story of a young *métis* girl who negotiates her marriage with her mother, Mariana, and the prospective husband himself, a Frenchman named Pierre Maulabour. The first installment finds Eglé, 16 years-old and unconcerned with money, arguing with her mother over the terms of the arrangement. Mariana increasingly pressures her child to marry Monsieur Maulabour for economic reasons, claiming, "[Eglé] does not understand that there is but one true thing in the world, the possession of a certain quantity of gold."[14] Eglé, on the other hand, views signarial marriage to a Frenchman as more shameful than being sold into slavery: "Sell me as a slave, me, the daughter of a French gentleman… spare me the shame that you are preparing for me."[15] This theme is carried into the second installment in the series, where Eglé argues that enslavement is a more sure path to her freedom than the social elevation brought by *signarial* marriage to a French settler. "Slavery or death!" Eglé exclaims desperately, bartering with her life and making her stance starkly clear: *signareship* is a fate worse than slavery–even a fate worse than death.[16]

Eglé's outburst highlights growing French uncertainties about women of color in nineteenth-century Senegal. She contends that, through slavery, she could buy her freedom; as a wife and woman of color, she would be bound to Monsieur Maulabour til death. The second and third installments provide a counterpoint to this argument through the Frenchman Pierre

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[13] "Une Signare. I-III," *La Presse,* July, 1841.

[14] "Une Signare. I," *La Presse*, July 21, 1841. Original quote in French: "[Eglé] ne comprend pas qu'il n'y a qu'une chose vraie au monde, la possession d'une certaine quanitité d'or."

[15] Ibid. Original text: "Vendez-moi comme esclave, moi, fille d'un gentilhomme de France… mais épargnez-moi la honte que vous me préparez."

[16] Ibid.

Maulabour. Instead of accepting Eglé's persistent requests for enslavement over marriage, Maulabour offers to pay Mariana and to house Eglé as a "voluntary" servant. Eglé acquiesces, and after working for a year in this voluntary servitude, she buys her freedom. However, the ending of the final installment seems to contradict Eglé's virulent resistance in the first two segments: she offers her hand in marriage to Pierre Maulabour.

The French colonial biases and narrative inconsistencies written into the "Une Signare" series point to the complications and contradictions inherent to the experiences of women of color in nineteenth-century urban coastal Senegal. However, a core aspect of this narrative and of French colonial society in Senegal continues to be misunderstood: *signareship* itself. The term "signare" is ubiquitous in the feuilleton series. Eglé is the titular *signare*; Mariana is both mother to a *signare* and a *signare* herself; various tertiary characters are *signares*; and the arrangement Eglé tries to avoid through servitude, slavery, and death is *signareship*. But who were the *signares* outside of the biased white male colonial consciousness? How did they fit into urban coastal society in French Senegal? Why is *signareship* compared to enslavement and royalty in the same document, and why does Eglé make the point that death would be an appropriate escape from it?

This chapter seeks to begin answering these questions by clarifying existing research on the *signares*. While we do not have writings or images directly from them, the *signares* are relatively well-documented in colonial texts and engravings. This relative prevalence in the colonial archive has allowed scholars like George Brooks, Martin Klein, and Hilary Jones to compile insightful histories of the *signares* and the urban coastal communities they inhabited. This chapter builds on these works by clarifying the *signares'* roles in colonial families, property ownership, trade, and religious morality, and by engaging in two core debates in the

contemporary historiography on the *signares*. The first of these debates asks a deceptively simple question: should the *signares* be defined as sexual entrepreneurs or collaborators? George Brooks engages this question in two different works from 1980 and 2003. In the article from 1980, his descriptions of the *signares* as "irresistibly attract[ive]" and "adroitly manipulat[ing] French passion and cupidity to their own ends and those of their families" ground him on the "sexual entrepreneur" side of this debate.[17] At the time of its publication, Brooks' article was innovative in its affirmation of signarial entrepreneurship and in its attempt to reframe *signarial* sexuality in novel ways. He offered a progressive response to the previous understanding that the *signares* "collaborated" with the French colonial project—a stance that failed to account for the condition of operating within a colonial structure intended to subjugate Black and *métis* women. However, in seeking to ground *signarial* agency in their entrepreneurship, Brooks overemphasizes their sexuality. In contrast, Brooks' monograph from 2003 appears to reverse his claims from 1980; he describes the *signares* as "ready collaborators" for European men seeking to accumulate wealth outside of their official positions within trading companies.[18] Hilary Jones frames these two positions as part of a greater debate on *signareship* in her 2013 book, *The Métis of Senegal*. Jones posits that historians have tended to fall prey to reductive, dichotomized understandings of *signares*, like the definitions of "sexual entrepreneur" and "collaborator" Brooks wrestled with in his own work.[19] This chapter responds to Jones' contention that these understandings are reductive by imagining a new definition for the *signares* outside of the sexual entrepreneur-collaborator binary.

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[17] Brooks, "Artists' Depictions of Senegalese Signares," 78.

[18] George Brooks, *Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 124.

[19] Jones, *The Métis of Senegal*, 21.

The second debate addressed in this chapter pertains to the societal positions *signares* occupied over the longue durée of the nineteenth century: did the *signares* experience a distinct "fall" from power in the latter half of the nineteenth century, or did they endure as part of the broader *métis* class? Brooks contends that the *signares* saw a holistic decline in the latter half of the nineteenth century after the abolition of slavery.[20] In contrast, Jones argues that the *signares* saw a concomitant economic decline and social resilience in the latter half of the nineteenth century as models for morality and as part of a greater métis class. Robin Hardy mostly agrees with these points in her 2016 dissertation, positing that while the *signares* decidedly declined in the years following abolition, the broader *métis* class they birthed endured.[21]

Before these debates can be addressed, however, we must first define who the *signares* were. The most important *signarial* identities for this project are their womanhood and their *métissage*. The Western imagination uses the physical and visual body to construct social categories of difference that are "hierarchically ordered, differentially placed in relation to power, and spatially distanced from one another."[22] Gender and race should be understood as social constructions of difference *assigned* to bodies, where the dichotomies of male/female and white/Black are associated with metaphysical dichotomous traits like speech/silence, visibility/invisibility, and civilization/uncivilization.[23] Womanhood is thus understood in the context of this project as a Western social construction associated with visual aspects of physical bodies; it is intended to help convey a person's position within the French colonial order. In the case of women in the French Empire, this usually meant their relegation to lower class positions

[20] Brooks, "Artists' Depictions of Senegalese Signares," 78.
[21] Robin Hardy, "'Dangerous vagabonds': resistance to slave emancipation and the colony of Senegal," (PhD diss., Montana State University, 2016), 162.
[22] Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 7-8.
[23] Oyewùmí, *The Invention of Women*, 7.

than men, but the *signares*, as we will see, did not always fit this narrative of womanhood within the French consciousness. The French term *métis* literally translates into English as "a person of mixed race," but this definition is reductive and conflates *métis* with another commonly known word, *mulâtre*, or "mixed-race."[24] *Métissage* can more accurately be understood as a person's racial *and* cultural mixing. Within the scope of this project, *métissage* points to the *signares'* intersectionality as women of color married to white men—simultaneously caught between racial categories of Blackness and whiteness, ethnic affinities to Wolof, Lebu, Sereer, and Tukulor heritages and France, and social classes as slave owners and women of color in a white patriarchal colonial society.[25] The racial elements of this *métissage* are another example of a socially constructed difference (associated with physical characteristics) that assigns metaphysical traits to the *signares*. Blackness within the European imagination tended to be associated with barbarism, greed, and *un*civilization while whiteness was usually linked to morality and civilization. Once again, we will see that the *signares*, located at the intersection of whiteness and Blackness, subvert this typical dichotomy. The *signares' métissage* and womanhood are integral to understanding how they fit into trade networks, religious dynamics, and social classes throughout the nineteenth century because, at every turn, their race and gender shaped their perceived belonging or externality to varying sectors of French colonial society. As we will see in Chapter Two, the *signares'* existences outside of rigid racial, cultural, and gendered boundaries forced the French to wrestle with their dichotomous ways of viewing the world. In each of the following sections, *métissage* and gender will be the primary lenses through

[24] *Mulâtre* identity refers to people of particularly Black and white ancestry.
[25] Mark Hinchman, "House and Household on Gorée, 1758-1837," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 65, no. 2, (2006): 171.

which I analyze and contextualize *signarial* identity in marriages and families, trade networks, religious dynamics, and socioeconomic classes in nineteenth-century urban coastal Senegal.

Signares, Marriage, and Family

The *signares'* prominence in urban coastal Senegal during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was first produced in the crucible of Afro-European marriage. These marriages were established through an arrangement called *mariage à la mode du pays*, or "country-style marriages" between African women and European men, entailing the negotiation of a marriage contract with the young woman's parents, a dowry to "seal the agreement," and a public ceremony "deemed acceptable to the urban community."[26] While marriages between African women and European men occurred at multiple strata of colonial society, the particular position of *signareship* was usually afforded to elite free African and Eurafrican women distinguished by their access to resources, experience with medicine and trade, and knowledge of African languages and culture. However, as Lisa Ze Winters explains, "the *possibility* of acquiring [signarial] status was available to all 'girls and young women…'" indicating that *signareship* was an option for African women to gain greater social and economic mobility in their communities.[27]

Marital unions with white European men afforded Black and *métis* women the wealth and political power connected to whiteness within the French Empire while still maintaining their racial, ethnic, and linguistic connections with Africa. Although colonial documents seem to indicate that these unions were peaceful and consensual, it is impossible to know whether this was the reality because we do not have accounts from the *signares* themselves explaining how

[26] Jones, *The Métis of Senegal*, 35.
[27] Lisa Ze Winters, *The Mulatta Concubine: Terror, Intimacy, Freedom, and Desire in the Black Atlantic*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 42.

they felt about their marriages to European men.[28] However, considering the wealth, power, and status these marriages could afford them, it is likely that many *signares* agreed to these unions in order to secure their futures and those of their children. Although the first generations of the *signares* were Black African women, the *signares* eventually developed into a class of mixed-race women whose identities flexibly belonged to Africa and Europe and to whiteness and Blackness. This liminality could be manipulated by Frenchmen and the French government to assert control over their wives, but it also provided the *signares* with a unique social dexterity through which they accumulated unprecedented wealth and social status for African women in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century French Empire.

Despite their prevalence in urban coastal Senegal, interracial unions were not condoned by metropolitan France in the nineteenth century. Even as early as the seventeenth century, the French government and the Roman Catholic Church attempted to eliminate such unions through a variety of different ordinances and public prohibitions. The Church, for example, forbade white men from marrying Black women regardless of their religious status, indicating that a woman's Christianity was not enough to justify a marriage to the Church if she was also Black. Even more, this meant that the Church's early issues with *mariage à la mode du pays* were not with religion but rather with race.[29] Many of the endeavors to do away with interracial marriage in the eighteenth century focused specifically on preventing miscegenation. This idea is exemplified by the prohibition of interracial marriage in the royal ordinance establishing the Senegal trading company, which "impl[ied] that [interracial] unions were based primarily on sexual desire."[30]

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[28] It is important to remember here that the feuilleton series from *La Presse* is a fictional account most likely created by a white French man for a white French audience. The *signares* purportedly quoted in this work are not actual *signares* speaking but imitations of the *signares*.

[29] Marylee Crofts, "Economic Power and Racial Irony: Portrayals of Women Entrepreneurs in French Colonial Senegal", *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 19, (1994): 218.

[30] Crofts, "Economic Power and Racial Irony", 219.

More explicitly, in 1724, the director of the French trading company suggested that white Parisian orphan girls be sent to Senegal to fulfill Frenchmen's sexual needs, transparently attempting to prevent Black African women from doing the same.[31] The request for Parisian orphan girls demonstrates that France was less concerned with pre or extra-marital sex than it was with Black female sexuality. These examples suggest that the dual identity of Black womanhood was associated with sexual depravity while white maleness was conveniently the standard for with morality in the eighteenth-century French imagination against which all moral positions were judged. Pre- and extra-marital sex could have also been viewed as contradictory to French Catholic morality, but it is only in conjunction with Black (and to some extent indigenous) women's purported sexual depravity that sex comes to represent immorality.

Sylvain Sankalé's 2008 book *A la mode du pays* demonstrates a similar sexualization of interracial marriage in the eighteenth-century French imagination. In this work, Sankalé reconstitutes his ancestor, the French soldier Antoine François Feuiltaine, and details his experiences living in Senegal between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. Though technically a work of fiction, Sankalé's use of familial primary source documents from 1788 to 1835 autobiographically resurrects Feuiltaine's voice and perspectives on race and marriage almost two centuries after his death. Feuiltaine reflects on the development of *signarial* marriages through this semi-fictional medium: "Concubinage thus took on all of the characteristics of marriage approved by the Church. A *signare* would not have wanted a man, whatever his wealth, if he wasn't publicly attached to her as her husband and hadn't already asked for her hand from all of her family. This novel form of marriage was called *mariage à la*

[31] Crofts, "Economic Power and Racial Irony", 219.

mode du pays."[32] Feuiltaine's use of the term "concubinage" not only hypersexualizes *signareship* and interracial marriage by equating it to extramarital sex, but it also erases the possibility for a more complex foundation for marriages between African women of color and white Frenchmen—replacing it with an image of a purely sexual relationship. In nineteenth-century metropolitan France, miscegenation was tightly linked to fears of racial "degeneration," where, in the warped French imagination, the mixing of Black blood with white blood would result in the *degeneration* of whiteness in the body of a mixed-race child.[33] This idea grew out of the scientific racism developed in the early nineteenth century, and it is discussed more thoroughly in Chapters Two and Three.

Given this long history of French metropolitan resistance to interracial marriage, the roles of gender and sexual desire cannot be overlooked in the dynamics between the *signares* and European men, but they also must not be overemphasized. The only permissible gender dynamic in marriages during this period was between a man and a woman. Thus, the "novel form of marriage" Feuiltaine references could not refer to heterosexual marriage in itself because the only socially and legally recognized unions in the late eighteenth and nineteenth-century French Empire were between men and women. Sexual desire was so normalized between heterosexual white couples that it did not warrant particular mention or notice–it was simply implicit and assumed. Because they are assumed, the considerations of gender and sex in marital

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[32] Sylvain Sankalé, *A la mode du pays*, (Paris: Riveneuve éditions, 2007): 47. Original text: "Le concubinage prit alors toutes les caractéristiques du mariage approuvé par l'Eglise. Une signare n'aurait pas voulu d'un homme, quelle que soit sa richesse, s'il n'était pas publiquement affiché comme son mari et n'avait pas préalablement demandé sa main à tous ses parents. Cette forme originale de mariage fut appelée *mariage à la mode du pays*" ; all translations provided by me.

[33] Ann Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexuality Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures," *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4, (1989): 643.

arrangements do not necessarily reflect a primarily sexual *basis* for marital unions overall, and they certainly do not indicate novelty or warrant particular mention in Feuiltaine's account.

Race, on the other hand, was more variable in marriages in the French Empire. Considering the legal precedent of banning interracial unions, Feuiltaine's "novel form of marriage" can only refer to marriages accorded between Black African women and white French men.[34] The attempted substitution of Black African women with white orphan girls from Paris in marital unions with white men indicates that the issue was not about sexual desire but rather race and the potential for mixed race offspring. If sexual desire in marriages was the problem, then why wouldn't the substitution of Black African women with white French girls simply replicate the same problem with different actors? The particular characterization of Black female sexuality as "concubinage" also indicates that sexual desire in general was not the problem in the French colonial consciousness—*Black female sexuality* was. To this end, interracial marriage was hypersexualized to provoke a more visceral opposition to marriages involving women of color, dubbing them as "blasphemous" or "unnatural" on account of the hypersexualized Black woman's involvement.[35]

The metropole and the Church's efforts to eliminate interracial marriage had very little effect on how marriage was conducted in Senegal itself. Crofts describes the royal ordinance for the trading company and the Church's religious interdictions as "no more than impotent threats from the metropole."[36] If hypersexuality *had* been the driving force for *mariage à la mode du pays*, then metropolitan France's various campaigns against miscegenation might have found more success in eliminating interracial marriages. However, the false emphasis on sex fails to

[34] There could not have been marriages between Black African men and white French women because there were no European women in Senegal during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries aside from the nuns sent after 1817.
[35] Crofts, "Economic Power and Racial Irony," 219.
[36] Ibid., 219.

account for the social and economic contracts that not only initiated relations between African women and European men, but also ensured that these relations would endure past the point of the initial colonial encounter. When Frenchmen first arrived at coastal Senegal in the seventeenth century, disease threatened to obliterate their communities. On average, one in three European men died within the first year of living in Senegal, and without local African women's knowledge of local medicine, it would have been exceedingly difficult to establish a European presence in Senegal.[37] Feuiltaine reflects on his own medical treatment by an African woman named Marie shortly after his arrival to Senegal in 1788:

> It took me several days to fully recover. Marie spent most of her days and often her nights watching me, bringing me medicines from the den of I don't know which sorcerer. She had fumigated, hung amulets from the windows, sprayed the dirt floor with stinking concoctions, slaughtered a cock, and poured a little blood in the four corners of the room… And, in fact, I healed. [38]

After saving his life, Marie later married Feuiltaine via *mariage à la mode du pays*. The translation of the nurse-patient dynamic to marriage was common in early urban Senegal. French men directly benefited from this relationship because the African women who treated them established "a life-style, a regimen, that contributed much to their survival and well-being in tropical Africa," sometimes making "the difference between life and death." [39] More particularly, African women's knowledge of local medicines for treating "ailments such as diarrhea, stomach disorders, malaria, and hepatitis…" allowed French men to live and work in Senegal, making

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[37] Crofts, "Economic Power and Racial Irony," 219.

[38] Sankalé, *A la mode du pays*, 58-59. Original text in French: "Je mis plusieurs jours à me rétablir complètement. Marie passait le plus clair de ses jours et souvent ses nuits à me veiller, à me porter ses médicaments sortis de l'antre de je ne sais quel sorcier. Elle avait fait des fumigations, suspendu des amulettes aux fenêtres, arrosé le sol de terre battue de décoctions puantes, égorgé un coq dont elle avait versé un peu du sang aux quatre coins de la pièce… Et, de fait, je guéris."

[39] George Brooks, "The *Signares* of Saint Louis and Gorée: Women Entrepreneurs in Eighteenth-Century Senegal," *Women in Africa, Studies and Social and Economic Change*, (1998): 40-41; Brooks, *Eurafricans in Western Africa*, 127.

their connections with African women not only preferable but necessary to their commercial endeavors in Africa.[40] The initial connection between Frenchmen and African women can thus be primarily understood as a means for French survival—not for sexual gratification.[41]

The French metropole and the Catholic Church's inability to recognize survival as a primary basis for interracial marriage confounded any efforts to eliminate interracial marriage in early Senegal. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, interracial marriage extended past Frenchmen's basic need to survive and became a stable unit for organizing and managing urban coastal society in Senegal. Even European officials began to see these marriages as a "necessary fact of life in the West African commercial port."[42] Here, interracial sex did play an important role in the production of prominent *métis* families. Martin Klein remarks in his 2009 article that "in the eighteenth century, *signares* were [already] creating Eurafrican families, the members of which were called the *habitants*… The *habitants* controlled the trade in local produce such as fish and grain, owned boats and houses, and owned slaves who could work those boats or be hired out to the company or state."[43] The *signares* thus gave birth to a *métis* class that similarly shared connections with Europe through their white fathers and to Africa through their Black and *métis* mothers. In this way, the *métis* class became the social elite in urban Senegal as the intermediaries between African traders from the mainland and European merchants on the coast. Until the mid-nineteenth century, *signares* resided at the head of the *métis* class, not only

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[40] Crofts, "Economic Power and Racial Irony," 219.

[41] Crofts describes Nathalie Reyss as coming to a similar conclusion in her study of *métissage* in Saint Louis, writing on page 219 of her article that "issues of health and survival pre-empted those of sexual attraction as the primary reasons of Frenchmen living with African women."

[42] Jones, *The Métis of Senegal*, 37.

[43] Martin Klein, "Slaves, Gum, and Peanuts: Adaptation to the End of the Slave Trade in Senegal, 1817-48," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, (2009): 896.

as wives to European men and mothers to *métis* individuals themselves, but also as powerful traders in their own right.

Marriage and family are critical to understanding the *signares* and their communities in the nineteenth century because they demonstrate *how* and *why* interracial marriages were forged despite legal and moral opposition from the metropole and the Roman Catholic Church. Survival initially necessitated connections between French men and African women, and the inability to recognize a basis other than sexuality for these arrangements inhibited effective prohibition of *mariage à la mode du pays* by metropolitan France. Investigating the hypersexualization of interracial marriages reveals how the French colonial consciousness took particular issue with Blackness in marital and sexual arrangements in order to prevent the sexual reproduction of Blackness and the pollution of whitness. By treating interracial unions as primarily sexual due to their involvement of Blackness, the French metropole occluded the foundational social and economic contracts between European men and African women that sustained these arrangements after the initial colonial encounter. In my second chapter, interrogations of French portrayals of interracial marriage, *métis* families, and their *signare* mothers will reveal the functions of these occlusions in the French imperial project. Perhaps most importantly, analyses of these portrayals within their historical contexts will reveal French perspectives and attitudes towards race, gender, and class and illuminate how communities in urban coastal Senegal actually functioned.

Signares, Property, and Trade

While marriage and family formed the foundation for the *signares'* prominence, property ownership and trade allowed for a significant expansion of their power throughout the eighteenth

century. The first impetus for this expansion was the Atlantic slave trade. For most of the eighteenth century, chartered European slave-trading companies like the Compagnie du Sénégal (1709-1718) and the subsequent Compagnie des Indes (1718-1767) ran the coastal city of Saint Louis. The *signares* owned slaves and the majority of boats and properties during this time, granting them primary control over the means for trade and skilled labor like fishing and construction. The *signare*s secured their initial involvement in European trade by regularly renting buildings and boats out to European merchants and officials.[44] After the French decided to start using skilled Africans to replace European workers in 1738, the *signares* also expanded to lease out slave labor to European trading companies, "us[ing] their contacts with Company officials to secure training and employment for their own slaves, thus creating the system of hiring out skilled slaves that dominated the labor market of the islands in the second half of the eighteenth century."[45]

However, in the early nineteenth century, the power the *signares* had amassed through their property and labor ownership was shaken by violent spasms in the slave trade. In 1814, the idea of internationally abolishing the slave trade was brought before the Congress of Vienna. Abolishing the Atlantic Slave Trade would change the nature of the economy the *signares* had manipulated for their benefit. Margaret McLane argues that after this proposition, the slave trade actually declined, and in places like Saint Louis, the economy reorganized around gum arabic as its raison d'être. At first glance, this claim seems valid. In 1815, the French crown issued an imperial decree condemning the slave trade; between 1817 and the 1837, the annual commercial activity in Saint Louis increased six-fold "from two million francs to twelve million in value" as

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[44] Jones, *The Métis of Senegal*, 47.

[45] James Searing, *West African slavery and Atlantic commerce: The Senegal River valley, 1700-1860*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1993), 105.

it rode the crest of the gum trade.[46] However, as with the persistence of *mariage à la mode du pays* despite metropolitan prohibitions, the slave trade in Senegal was not smoothly or completely abolished at metropole's request.

Drawing on data from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, Figure 2 below shows the number of slaves who embarked from Senegambian and Atlantic offshore ports across time from the year 1780 to 1830. Major gaps in the data, marked by y-values at zero, can partially be attributed to a lack of sufficient source materials for the dates in question, but the particular space between 1804 and 1814 can also be attributed to the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815). France fought Great Britain for possession over Senegambian territory during this time, and it is possible that the data was lost or never recorded during the regime changes. It is also possible that the slave trade out of Senegambia itself came to a halt. In any event, the numbers after 1815 contradict McLane's claim that slave exports decreased after 1814: the slave trade generally *increased* through 1821 before gradually decreasing until 1825.

[46] James Webb Jr., "The Trade in Gum Arabic: Prelude to French Conquest in Senegal," *The Journal of African History* 26, No. 2, (1985): 156.

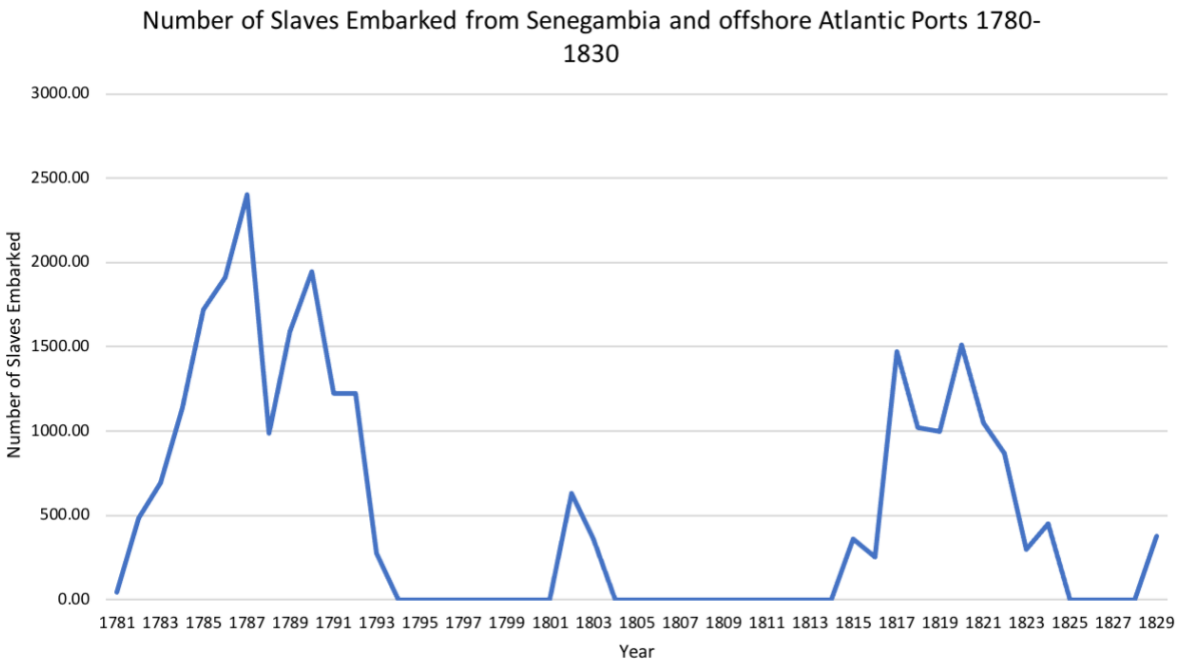

Figure 2. Number of slaves embarked from Senegambia and offshore Atlantic Ports from the year 1781 to the year 1830. Slave export numbers fluctuated between 1781 and 1794, 1801 and 1804, and 1814 and 1825. The years between 1794 and 1801 demonstrate zero recorded slave embarkments. The years between 1804 and 1814 and 1825 and 1828 similarly demonstrate zero recorded slave embarkments. [47]

While a ten-year window might not appear significant in the scheme of the entire nineteenth century, it is critical to remember that every data point above zero on the y-axis represents the sale and deportation of a human being into slavery. It also speaks to the instability of the slave trade and the commercial turmoil marking the period after 1817. McLane's contention that slavery declined in the wake of the Congress of Vienna is generally correct if considering the nineteenth century as a whole and tracing history backwards from abolition in 1848; but when looking more closely, it becomes clear that there was at least a decade during which the *signares*, who had built much of their identities, security, and power on the slave trade, might have questioned the resilience of their power in the face of the abolition. The treatment of the period between 1815 and 1825 as a broad decline is deceptively teleological because it implicitly

[47] Slave Voyages, *Number of Slaves Embarked from Senegambia and offshore Atlantic Ports 1780-1830,* (2018), distributed by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#timeline.

reflects the abolition of slavery as an institution in 1848 back on this period and assumes that any changes therein must necessarily have been in service to abolition. The years between 1815 and 1825 are thus reduced to a "decline" in the Atlantic Slave Trade rather than illuminated as a period of turmoil—as the spasms of an industry struggling to adapt to a rapidly changing socioeconomic climate at home and abroad. If we look at this period from the perspective of the people living it—people who did not know that the global climate would continue moving towards abolition at colonial and international levels—the years directly following 1815 can be understood as a period of immense uncertainty and instability, especially for people like the *signares*. Even more, the uptick in slave embarkations following Napoleon's condemnation of the slave trade can be understood not as an outlier in a broader history of decline, but as a symptom of the Senegal colony's ideological distance from the metropole.

In sum, Figure 1 suggests that the slave trade endured episodically after 1817. Saliou Mbaye corroborates this finding in his essay from 2000, writing: "From 1817 to 1848, Saint Louisian society will have been marked by slavery."[48] While McLane's narrative of decline fails to capture the continued trade in slaves, her stronger point has to do with her findings on the gum export trade. As the slave trade spasmodically declined over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century, European industrialization called for trade in another resource from West Africa: gum arabic. James Searing describes this as a period of "structural adjustment" in Senegal, where a gradual transition away from the export slave trade occurred in two phases.[49] The first phase, roughly from 1800 to 1840, represented this shift to gum arabic exports. During

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[48] Saliou Mbaye. "L'esclavage domestique à Saint-Louis à travers les archives notariées (1817- 1848)," in *Saint-Louis et l'esclavage: actes du Symposium international sur 'La traite négrière à Saint Louis du Sénégal et dans son arrière-pays',* ed. Djibril Samb (Dakar, Senegal: Université Cheikh Anta Diop, 2000), 157. Original quote: "De 1817 à 1848, la société saint-louisienne aura été marquée par l'esclavage."

[49] Searing, *West African Slavery and Commerce*, 167.

this time, gum arabic became increasingly important to traders like the *signares* and their *habitant* sons. The gum arabic trade relied heavily on preexisting river trade networks between *métis* traders on the coast and Muslim traders at inland desert posts called the *escales*. The Trarza, Brakna, and Darmankour were the autochthonous groups involved in the gum trade and considering their staunch opposition to French trade monopolies in the late eighteenth century, their relationships with the French were oftentimes tenuous.[50] The *signares* were thus critical intermediaries for these exchanges because of their connections to French merchants through marriage and to Muslim traders at the *escales* through language and mutual African heritage.

The trade in gum was oftentimes conducted through a *gum-for-guinée* exchange, where the gum harvested from Senegal was traded for a valuable blue cloth from India called a *guinée*. Gum was first extracted inland by slaves and exchanged for *guinées* and millet by Muslim desert traders; then *habitant*, French, and free African traders from neighboring territories carried it down the Senegal River towards coastal towns like Saint Louis to be sold as an export good. Gum arabic had been gradually incorporated into European textile production from the beginning of the seventeenth century, with West African gum exports going from over five hundred tons per year in the early seventeenth century to over one thousand tons by the 1780s.[51] By 1830, the gum trade had become the focus for "virtually all the commercial activity of the colony," and the *signares* mediated the gum trade as it brought from inner Senegal to the coast and shipped from Saint Louis.[52] Their knowledge of African and European languages, connections to European merchants and African traders, and their personal possession of hirable slaves made the *signares* critical to the profitable sale of gum, to their own benefit and that of their European husbands.

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[50] Pernille Røge, "Rethinking African in the Age of Revolution: The Evolution of Jean-Baptiste-Léonard Durand's Voyage Au Sénégal," *Atlantic Studies* 12, (2016): 393.
[51] Webb Jr., "The Trade in Gum Arabic," 149.
[52] Webb Jr., "The Trade in Gum Arabic," 153.

An especially profitable facet to the *signares'* involvement in the gum trade was their participation in "different kinds of commerce not listed in French economic statistics."[53] Prior to 1817, the directors of these monopolies were usually merchants whose tenure in Senegal was limited to three years.[54] Regardless of the Company's profitability under their leadership, these merchants quickly returned to Europe, only to be replaced by another European director in short order. Company employees could similarly work in Senegal for short periods of time, marrying *signares* and ostensibly accumulating wealth for the Company, before returning to France–sometimes even to wives or families. Because their tenure in Senegal was not contingent upon the amount of profit they generated for the Company, these directors and employees had more of an incentive to accumulate wealth for themselves than they did for the Company itself. The Company tried to discourage this prioritization of personal gain by banning private trade networks, but European merchants had a critical way of circumventing these prohibitions: the *signares*. The *signares* were under no such obligation to avoid private trade since they were not employed–indeed, they were not even employ*able*–by European trading companies. "[Eurafrican and African women]," George Brooks explains, "represented the best prospect for [European men] to acquire wealth, albeit by means of illicit commerce that they were charged with preventing or eradicating!"[55] The *signares* thus had the flexibility to participate in the illicit commerce hidden in the underbelly of the gum trade, accumulating wealth for themselves and for their European husbands in the form of trade goods, gold, illustrious clothing, and prior to 1848, slaves.

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[53] Klein, "Slaves, Gum, and Peanuts", 909.
[54] Searing, *West African Slavery*, 163.
[55] Brooks, *Eurafricans in West Africa*, 124-126.

The replacement of short-term merchants and directors with "resident French merchants" in 1817 caused these intricate illicit trade networks to begin to fray. The establishment of the joint-stock Compagnie de Galam that same year established a trade monopoly in the upper part of the Senegal River that only employed French *residents* of Saint Louis and Gorée.[56] These resident merchants had a fundamentally different approach to *habitant* (*métis*) traders and to Senegal more generally. As opposed to the merchants and directors who had managed the Company for short fixed periods, resident merchants lived in Senegal for periods of time based on the Company's financial success. If the Company did not make a profit, these resident merchants would be removed and replaced regardless of the length of time they had worked in Senegal. This system encouraged "long-term commitment[s]" to Senegal and the Company and diminished the financial returns of trying to accumulate the greatest personal wealth at the Company's cost. To resident merchants, *habitant* intermediaries also caused a "needless loss of profits."[57] Inevitably, this wounded the illicit trade and the *signares* who managed it. Searing summarizes this point: "The end of [*habitant*] monopoly undermined the system of smuggling for personal profit which had formed the basis for the economic alliances between European merchants and *signares*… Resident merchants had no interest in concealing their private trade operations by forming a liaison with a local woman…"[58] As the gum trade took off, the colonial economy in Senegal increasingly shifted the *signares* to the margins of commercial activity.

The intense competition for control of the gum markets between *métis*, French, and free African merchants and the boom or bust nature of gum harvests defined this period of structural adjustment. Wars between the French and inland groups like the Trarza over a failed plantation

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[56] Margaret McLane, "Commercial Rivalries and French Policy on the Senegal River, 1831-1858," *African Economic History*, No. 15, (1986): 42.
[57] Searing, *West African Slavery*, 164.
[58] Searing, *West African Slavery*, 164.

economy and control of gum markets not only encouraged French colonial intervention farther into the interior in Senegal but also destabilized French-*métis* relations. In 1834, the French blockaded the river to "prevent the habitants from continuing their 'disloyal' trade in gum with the Trarza."[59]This marked a new era in French treatment of *métis* in Senegal. Instead of viewing *habitants* as allies and valuable connections to traders in the *escales*, they were increasingly viewed as necessary allies "so long as they held the keys to diplomacy and military strength of the colony."[60] Though the *signares* maintained marital relations with these French merchants and were thereby treated differently than the rest of the *métis* class, the increasingly unstable relationship between *métis* men and the French colonial administration further threatened the economic basis of the *signares'* power in urban coastal Senegal.

Even though most of the *habitants'* privileges were restored through a royal trade ordinance in 1842, the antagonisms created during the 1800-1840 transition to the gum trade revealed that *métis* power now largely depended "on the graces of the colonial state."[61] The trade ordinance approved *habitant* men to participate in trade, demonstrating that *métis* participation in trade was now no longer a right as a resident of urban coastal Senegal, but rather a privilege granted by the French colonial administration. There is little to no evidence that the *signares* were included with the male *habitant* traders approved by the French administration, indicating that the *signares'* experiences of French colonialism in the nineteenth century were not guided solely by their racial *métissage*, but also by their gender identities as women. The *signares'* exclusion from approved trader status in the 1842 Trade Ordinance was not based upon their racial or ethnic identities, because men who shared the same connections to Blackness and

[59] Ibid., 174.
[60] Ibid., 175.
[61] Ibid., 175.

Africa were approved to participate. Thus, even in a period where *métis* men regained their economic status (albeit at the whims of the French colonial administration), the *signares* were beginning to be relegated to the margins of market participation and power.

To make matters worse, the gum market crashed in the early 1840s, once again destabilizing the tenuous foothold the *signares* had maintained as intermediaries between inland Muslim traders from the Trarza, Brakna, and Darmankour ethnic groups, and French, *métis*, and free African traders on the coast. The *signares* were able to survive this period because they were experienced in operating on the margins of commercial networks, and because, through all of the socioeconomic changes since the first few decades of the nineteenth century, they had become resilient by maintaining multiple sources of personal profit. The *signares'* economic power had partially been derived from the illicit trade running adjacent to the gum market before the establishment of resident merchants in 1817, and although this trade and the export slave trade were hindered by French intervention, the *signares* maintained another avenue for personal profit: the *internal* slave trade.

Until 1848, Gorée and Saint Louis were robust slave societies where the *signares* owned the vast majority of slaves.[62] Several surveys of the laborers employed in river and maritime commerce conducted by the French administration revealed that throughout the 1820s, these economies were dependent on slave labor "across all categories of employment."[63] The *signares'* dominant ownership of slaves in Saint Louis and Gorée not only allowed them to accumulate private wealth by hiring out labor but provided a bulwark against encroachments on their property and power by the French colonial administration. If threatened, the *signares* and, to a

[62] Searing, *West African slavery*, 176; Jones, *The Métis of Senegal*, 50.
[63] Searing, *West African slavery*, 176.

lesser degree, male *habitants* could withhold their slaves' labor to strongarm the French administration into a compromise. Slave ownership itself was also a large part of the *signares'* social capital. "For elite women," Hilary Jones explains, "owning slaves served as a… conspicuous marker of their status. Slave ownership symbolized the wealth and prosperity of the household."[64] In this way, *signare* ownership of slaves also reified class differences between *métis* and Black Africans, asserting *métis* proximity to whiteness as grounds for possessing other people of color and thus racializing slavery as a "Black" class category. The optics of possessing slaves thus accorded the *signares* greater respect and influence in their own communities and helped to solidify their identities as elite women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The 1848 abolition of slavery throughout the French Empire liquidated one of the *signares'* primary ways of accumulating personal wealth and maintaining social prominence. Abolition by no means meant the end of unfree labor in Senegal; it reproduced slavery under different names like *tutelles* and the *tirailleurs sénégalais* that were more morally palatable to the metropole and the international community.[65] However, abolition had very real implications for the dynamic between the French colonial administration and the *signares*. James Searing describes emancipation as "the perfect weapon to employ against a slave-owning class that had thus far been able to frustrate [the French] drive for hegemony."[66] With abolition, the *signares* lost their bulwark against French encroachments on their economic power, property, and one of their primary sources of social capital. Because the illicit trade was crippled by the installation of resident trade merchants after 1817 and they were excluded from legitimate trade through the

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[64] Jones, *The Métis of Senegal*, 49-50.

[65] The *tutelles* were freed child slaves who were then adopted by Frenchmen and used for labor. This system is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three. The *tirailleurs sénégalais* was an army of Africans who fought on France's behalf in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. Joining the *tirailleurs* was made to seem like a voluntary choice but was actually a replication of unfree labor under a different name.

[66] Searing, *West African slavery*, 183-184.

1842 Trade Ordinance, the *signares* found themselves with very little economic basis to justify their elite social status aside from their familial connections to *habitant* and French trade and their wealth in gold, clothing, and boats.

If Searing's first phase of structural adjustment was the rise of the gum arabic trade, the second phase was marked by a shift from gum arabic to the peanut trade after 1840. In the wake of the gum crisis, the French colonial administration scrambled to find a resource that could revitalize its flagging economy. In response to the metropolitan demand for an alternative to British palm oil, the French administration decided to cultivate peanuts for oil in the same inland areas where gum arabic was grown and extracted. France also sought to improve economic opportunities for French traders in Senegal, so the plan to cultivate peanuts was paired with a mission to establish "free trade" solely for Frenchmen along the Senegal River.[67] To implement free trade and establish spaces for peanut cultivation, however, the French had to oust many of the Muslim traders and *habitants* who had managed the river trade at the *escales* for over a century. This provoked warfare between the French and the Trarza and a jihad against the French led by al-Hajj Umar for the remainder of the 1850s.[68] The French administration's ultimate triumph over Umar and the Trarza in the late 1850s was a resounding victory for French traders but a grave defeat for the *habitants* and the *escales* they replaced along the Senegal River.[69] Although *métis* men's prominence in colonial society was secured by their increasing leadership in the colonial administration and their privileged access to education, their displacement by French merchants signaled a changing relationship with the French administration. More broadly, the wars in the 1850s marked the first stage in France's transition from commercialism

[67] Here, "free trade" means trade regulated by French colonial agents in favor of French economic interests—it was only "free" trade for French men.
[68] Searing, *West African slavery*, 190-191.
[69] Leland Barrows, "Faidherbe and Senegal: A Critical Discussion," *African Studies Review* 19, No. 1, (1976): 96.

to imperialism and the expansion of their colonial project deeper into Senegal.[70] For the *signares*, abolition of the *escales* and installation of French merchants along the Senegal River meant destruction of the trade networks they had adeptly manipulated since the eighteenth century and their practical expulsion from colonial commercial networks. Peanut agriculture rapidly grew to surpass the gum trade in exports by 1870, calcifying a reorganized trade system predicated on imperial expansion and domination rather than the cooperation and mutual exchange that had permitted French presence and *signare* participation in the first place.

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the *signares* had been critical to the development and maintenance of the slave and gum markets. They hired out slave labor, leased buildings and boats, translated languages, and forged connections between French merchants and African traders in the interior. By participating in illicit trade networks connected to the gum trade, the *signares* also accumulated unprecedented wealth for themselves, their European husbands, and their *métis* families in gold and trade goods. The termination of the illicit trade connected to gum commerce in 1817, the gum crash in the 1840s, the abolition of slavery in 1848, and the reorganization of the colonial economy around French "free trade" and peanut agriculture along the Senegal River profoundly destabilized the *signares'* power in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Signares, Christianity, Morality, and "Civilization"

Even before the military conquests of the 1850s, the French had been directing urban coastal Senegal towards an imperial future. The reorganization of the urban coastal economy between 1817 and 1850 was a prelude to this economic imperialism, but there were also social and

[70] McLane, "Commercial Rivalries," 39.

cultural elements of imperialism reflected in the mores and norms of urban coastal society. In this same period between 1817 and the 1850s, the French aimed to assert control over the people in Saint Louis and Gorée by claiming they were in need of moral guidance–a guidance, they argued, that could only be provided through Catholicism. Although the *habitants* had nominally been Catholic since the eighteenth century, the first step in the Catholicization of nineteenth-century urban coastal Senegal was to claim that their Catholicism had been polluted by Islam, African fetishism, and the moral depravity of the African populations who lived there. In equating Catholicism to morality, the degree to which a community had been Catholicized became the extent to which it had been morally *civilized* by the French.

Martin Klein traces the beginning of the French Catholic mission in Senegal to the 1817 restoration of French presence in Senegal. While the French administration in the late eighteenth century had not paid much mind to the Catholicization of Saint Louis or Gorée, "the restored monarchy had a stronger commitment to the Catholic religion, reflecting… a different conception of a colony in Africa."[71] This commitment manifested shortly thereafter with the establishment of Catholic churches, schools, and orphanages throughout urban coastal Senegal. In 1819, seven nuns arrived to Saint Louis to facilitate Catholic instruction, particularly of young women and girls.[72] Education in general was a critical vehicle for the French Catholic mission because it allowed for the seemingly innocuous indoctrination of African and Eurafrican populations with French moral values under the guise of the privileged experience of education. However, another more insidious method of conveying the Catholic moral message to urban coastal populations was equally important: the education of young women like the *signares*. The

[71] Klein, "Slaves, Gum, and Peanuts", 898.
[72] Jones, *The Métis of Senegal*, 77.

signares were ideal messengers for the French Catholic mission precisely because of their locality between Africa and Europe and Blackness and whiteness. Their proximity to whiteness allowed them to have better education that their free and enslaved Black counterparts, but their proximity to Blackness and particularly Black slave women and girls meant they could also transmit this religious message directly to these women in their homes. In this spirit, the nuns sent to Saint Louis in 1819 focused on educating their first class of twelve *signares*. In 1822, now with forty-eight signares and their daughters, religious instruction expanded to include lessons in French language and morality.[73] The *signares'* proximity to the white French elite in the colony meant that in order to maintain their elite status, they needed to convert to Catholicism, embody Catholic morality, and transmit that morality to Black slaves.

In 1822, the first missionary was sent to Saint Louis from the metropole. Upon his arrival, Father Fournier "began a campaign against the superstition, moral corruption, and ignorance of the habitant Catholic community. His prime targets were the influence of Islam on so-called Catholics, and the immorality of customary marriage."[74] In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the *signares* had been known for encouraging religious pluralism in Saint Louis through the celebration of both Easter and Eid, the baptism and circumcision of children, and the use of gris-gris (talismans) while regularly attending Catholic mass.[75] Fournier saw this as the bastardization of Catholicism and sought to extirpate any non-Catholic religious elements from Catholic practices in urban coastal Senegal. In 1824, this effort came to fruition when the *signares* of Gorée relinquished their gris-gris bags at mass.[76]

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[73] Ibid., 77.
[74] Searing, *West African slavery*, 164.
[75] Jones, *The Métis of Senegal*, 37.
[76] Ibid., 79

Fournier's specific focus on customary marriage reflected broader anxieties in the metropole over the growth and strength of the mixed-race population in Senegal. These worries were founded upon the feeling in the metropole that France had little control over the racial composition of the urban coastal colony. By claiming that *mariage à la mode du pays* was immoral because it was not tied to Catholic traditions of marriage called *mariage à la française*, the French were able to veil their racial anxieties in a religious moral code that transcended even the French state.[77] Naming women of color involved with white men "concubines" problematized interracial arrangements without explicitly targeting Black sexuality; and the invocation of Catholic morality justified French intervention in *mariage à la mode du pays* as a civilization effort demanded by something higher than Senegal or the metropole.

The *signares'* need to embody Catholic morality in order to maintain their elite class status greatly shaped what they wore. As the Atlantic Slave Trade sputtered in the aftermath of the Congress of Vienna, the *signares* concertedly conformed to the cultural and moral expectations of the French bourgeoisie.

[77] "Une Signare. III.," *La Presse*, July 23, 1841.

Figure 3. Signare.[78]

Figure 3, an 1853 engraving from Abbey Boilat's book *Esquisses sénégalaises*, depicts a woman of color sitting in a European-style room, hands folded demurely in her lap, with her body fully covered by a long wine-colored dress and a white cloth draped over one shoulder. While her headdress and her shawl are distinctly African, her calm expression, her erect posture, her modest dress, and the vase on the fireplace emulate the European style for portraiture from the nineteenth century. While the artist for this piece is unknown, Brooks provides a possible origin

[78] Figure 3, unknown artist, "Signare," engraving, 1853, In *Trésors de l'iconographie du Sénégal colonial*, by Xavier Ricou, Figure C7, Paris: Riveneuve éditions, 2007.

story for this image: "One may speculate that Frenchmen living in Senegal were concerned that the people of France (including their relatives and friends) would see representations of the famed *signares* of Senegal which reflected creditably on themselves."[79] To this end, because the setting, pose, and even the figure herself were formed within this white male consciousness, this image cannot necessarily be taken as factual evidence of the *signares'* behavior or fashion. However, it can be understood as a reflection of the social and moral standards the *signares* were expected to conform to and uphold in 1841. In keeping with the civilization-via-Catholicization project begun in 1817, this *signare* is modest and contained—her relaxed expression suggesting her contentment with this role. Styles of dress thus presented a way for the *signares* to solidify their belonging to the moral Catholic elite, but also for the French to impose their idea of "civilization" on urban coastal Senegal. But this did not necessarily come at the total cost of the *signares'* Wolof roots. The famous *signarial* headdress, depicted in Figure 3 in a yellow ochre color, is ubiquitous in depictions of the *signares* throughout the nineteenth century. Against the European-style background, the *signarial* headdress in this image represents the *signares'* continued connection to Africa (and thereby her distance from France) without violating the expectation of modesty enforced by the increasingly Catholicized climate.

The Catholicization of the urban elite through moral education and increasing cultural expectations of Frenchness enlisted the *signares* to transmit the French Catholic message to the rest of urban society. Jones argues that, despite the economic tumult in the first half of the nineteenth century, the *signares* are resilient as members of the social elite through their roles as models for morality in their communities. Catholic education provided the signares with a privileged opportunity to receive instruction in French and, beginning in the 1880s, to develop

[79] Brooks, "Artists' Depictions of the Signares," 86.

skills typical of French middle-class women, like embroidery and piano–skills which non-*signarial* women of color were never given the chance to learn. But, as Jones remarks, these "privileges" cannot be taken out of their imperial context. French language instruction was viewed as an imperative element in establishing French hegemony in Senegal, and the *signares* were considered "the key to instilling the habit of communicating in French for future generations" as the mothers to the mêtis class and purportedly natural models for morality in their communities.[80]

French Catholic religious imperialism sought to fashion a colony in its own image through cultural and moral control of mixed-race women. Islam and *mariage à la mode du pays* became particular targets of this conquest to "civilize" Senegal because, in the French colonial consciousness, civilization had a fixed meaning and affiliation with France, the Catholic Church, maleness, and whiteness. The French colonial administration thus aimed to transform the *signares* into a medium for bringing this religious and moral "civilization" to urban coastal Senegal, but the question as to whether they succeeded is still up for debate. The *signares'* maintenance of their signature headdresses, the continuation of interracial marriages throughout the nineteenth century, and the resilience of *métis men* in the colonial administration indicates that the French moral and cultural conquest was forced to compromise with the people it aimed to conquer.

[80] Jones, *The Métis of Senegal*, 100.

Signares: Sexual entrepreneurs or collaborators? Did they fall or endure?

The *signares'* womanhood and racial, ethnic, and cultural *métissage* uniquely suited them to navigate the complex colonial situation in nineteenth century urban coastal Senegal. Their positionality between white France and Black Africa allowed them to parlay their language skills, their familial connections with Frenchmen and Africans, and their economic knowledge to acquire unprecedented wealth and status in their communities. Their womanhood gave them direct connections to French men as their wives and the mothers of their children and to Black slave people as their slaveowners and fellow people of color. On the one hand, the *signares'* manipulation of their identities to accumulate wealth has been understood by some scholars as collaboration with the French. The act of marrying and building families with colonizers in and of itself seems to corroborate this narrative. From this perspective, the *signares'* wealth and power are a direct product of their compliance with the colonizer–a compliance which George Brooks described as "ready" or willing in 2003.[81] The collaborator paradigm does not search for the *signares'* agency, but rather implies that any original meaningful act was committed by the French, thus centering agency with the colonizer. On the other hand, efforts to highlight *signarial* agency have identified marriage–and thereby sexuality–as the basis for their power. Brooks also embraces the "sexual entrepreneur" perspective in his 1980 article in which he highlights the *signares'* "irresistibility" as a primary impetus for their climb to power.[82]

This research argues that Brooks' confusion about how to define the *signares'* relationships with the French, Africans, and power demonstrates that the *signares* cannot be understood within a sexual entrepreneur-collaborator dichotomy. The sexual entrepreneur

[81] See Brooks' quote on page 3 which describes the signares as "ready collaborators."
[82] See Brooks' quote on page 3 which describes the signares' "irresistibility" to Frenchmen.

category is built upon the conflation of marital arrangements with sex described earlier in the chapter; the *signares'* initial unions with Frenchmen were based upon Frenchmen's need for survival and the *signares'* knowledge of local diseases and medicines. The collaborator category fails to account for the external force of the colonial situation in shaping *signare* compliance with the French; to argue that the *signares* gave willing compliance to the French neglects the fact that the *signares'* womanhood and their proximity to Blackness automatically placed them at a disadvantage in a colonial consciousness that treated whiteness and maleness as inherently superior. Furthermore, the inability to imagine *signarial* agency outside of the limited scope of their sexuality and their collaboration demonstrates a narrow understanding of the *signares'* actual roles in colonial urban coastal Senegal and of agency more broadly. The *signares* were mothers, wives, trade intermediaries, participants in illicit trade, slave owners, and wealthy Catholics. They adopted French decorum, language, holidays, and religion while maintaining their ability to speak African languages, (initially) practice Islam, and dress in African clothing. None of these acts can easily be categorized as purely "sexual" because marriage, family, trade, and property ownership include a complex network of social, cultural, and economic agreements that didn't depend solely or even primarily on sex. Similarly, none of these acts can be considered purely collaborative, because the *signares* were navigating a colonial situation in which their self-preservation and the preservation of their families was contingent upon their ability to adapt to changing socioeconomic conditions, The *signares'* continual negotiation of their connections to Europe and to Africa allowed them to survive the four great economic shifts around gum, illicit trade, slavery, and peanuts and the concurrent Catholic mission–all of which were shaped by a colonial administration bent on expanding its commercial empire at whatever cost to autochtonous peoples.

Signarial agency should thus be traced not only to particular actions, but to their continued struggle to survive the rapidly changing world around them. While the *signares'* history in the nineteenth century must be framed within a context of socioeconomic turmoil and instability, it is also a story of endurance. The *signares* did ultimately fall from their positions of economic power, and though their social power endured through the end of the century, it was through their tenuous conversion into models of French morality. The *signares* did lose most of the power and wealth they had maintained for over a century, and by the early twentieth century, *signareship* had become obsolete. However, the classic "rise and fall" narrative for the *signares* views history from such a macroscopic perspective that it fails to notice instances of the *signares'* adaptability and endurance.

These examples of tension and endurance are critical for understanding how race, gender, and class functioned in French Senegal throughout the nineteenth century because they expose moments of weakness and uncertainty in contemporary histories that center European colonial agency over the agency of the peoples they colonized. Though this chapter treated Feuiltaine and Darondeau's depictions of the *signares* as products of the French colonial consciousness, Chapter Two will focus on interrogating French primary source materials including the feuilleton series, etchings, and ethnographies as *mirrors* for French colonial ideology. Each source will be considered in the context of the economic, social, and cultural changes and the greater chronological and thematic narratives elucidated in this chapter to reveal French perspectives and attitudes towards race, gender, and class in nineteenth-century Senegal. In Chapter Three, these perspectives and attitudes will then be used as an ideological framework to locate Black women in urban coastal nineteenth-century Senegal, challenging their erasure in the masculinized and whitewashed histories.

Chapter Two: Ceci N'est Pas Une Signare

While my first chapter explores multiple examples of contemporary scholarship on the *signares,* this chapter dives deeper into primary visual and written portraits of the *signares* from the nineteenth century. However, there is a critical problem with these source materials: none of them were composed by the *signares* themselves. In fact, there are no known records written or illustrated by the signares, let alone documents created by the *signares* about themselves or their experiences. The primary source materials on the *signares* surviving today were created almost exclusively by French men–many of whom had never even been to Senegal. Unfortunately, the erasure of indigenous voices–especially indigenous women's voices–is not unique to urban coastal Senegal, nor is it unique to the *signares* within the Francophone world. This erasure has historically presented a titanic barrier to accessing indigenous women's histories, giving rise to the famous Spivakian question, "Can the subaltern speak?" Or in this particular case, "Can the *signares* speak?"[83] One of the greatest tragedies of the historical record on Senegal as it stands today is that the *signares* have not been able to speak directly with us. This much we know. However, as this chapter demonstrates, it is possible, even through the biased voices of French colonial agents, to better understand the social and political landscape the *signares* inhabited and to locate them within the nineteenth-century French colonial project.

French colonial documents can be useful precisely *because* of their explicit and implicit biases about the *signares.* Analyzing sources on the *signares for* their biases helps to root out the colonial perspectives that have warped the archive since the initial colonial encounter. Visual sources, too, can be "read" for dialectic value. "Our [Western] body forms are considered expressions of an interior, not inscriptions on a flat surface," Oyèrónké Oyewùmí cites. "The

[83] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," *Die Philosophin* 14, no. 7 (2003), 42.

body becomes a text, a system of signs to be deciphered, read, and read into… bodies are textualized, read by others as expressive of a subject's psychic interior."[84] Visual representations of the *signares* created by Western men similarly contain signs that represent a sort of psychic interior, but not necessarily the signares'. Artistic representations of the *signares* are not really *signares*; they are Western *constructions* of *signares*, or projections of what white French men believed *signares* to be. Thus, the psychic interiors represented by these artistic works are not entirely those of the *signares* themselves, but rather those of the French men who designed these images. In short, French artists projected their (mis)understandings of the *signares'* psychic interiors onto visual constructions of their bodies. This idea can be extended to include *signares'* environments and relationships with other figures. Landscapes, wildlife, houses, other figures, and the spaces between each can similarly be understood as reflections of how the French understood another kind of psychic interior–an *African* interior.

This chapter investigates these "interiors" using four key questions: First, how are visual markers of race, gender, and class in French depictions of the *signares* used to articulate "difference" between the *signares* and Black African women (who were not married to European men), white French women, and white French men? What do these constructions of difference say about French perspectives on and attitudes towards race, gender, and class over the course of the nineteenth century? What do they say about the ideological circumstances women of color inhabited in nineteenth-century urban coastal Senegal? And finally, how can we understand these works as tools for the developing French colonial project? In interrogating each written or visual primary source, I use three principal analytical categories: race, gender, and class. While the separation of these concepts into three distinct terms seems to indicate that each category is

[84] Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 2.

mutually exclusive, my project instead views them through Black feminist and intersectional lenses as spontaneous and mutually constitutive forces.[85] The idea that African women were colonized by Europeans as Africans and then separately inferiorized as African women is thus not quite correct; African women were marginalized for their intersectional identity as African women, whose Blackness and Africanness were inseparable from their identities as women, and whose womanhood was inextricable from their Blackness and Africanness.[86] Even more, as *métis* women who existed at the crossroads of multiple racial and ethnic identities, the *signares* destabilized the neat, binary categories in the European imagination. In other words, even as one category is rhetorically singled out for analysis, the other two categories must simultaneously be taken into account. The fluidity and interrelationality of these categories is central to my work, but for the sake of analytical praxis, race, gender, and class are provisionally adopted. Leslie McCall describes this approach as the inter-categorical intersectional approach: "provisionally adopt[ing] existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality among multiple and conflicting dimensions."[87] One of the important effects of this way of thinking is that it subverts "dichotomous, oppositional thinking by employing both/and rather than either/or categorization."[88] It recognizes the multiplicative effects of race, gender, and class, where women of color are not only oppressed for their Blackness *or* their womanhood in any given situation, but they are simultaneously oppressed for the mutually constituted identity of being Black (or *métis*) women. Another effect is that it permits more nuanced, unstable, and decentered social meanings that interact with and

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[85] Rose Brewer, "Theorizing Race, Class and Gender: The New Scholarship of Black Feminist Intellectuals and Black Women's Labor," *Race Gender and Class* 2, (1999): 32-33.
[86] Oyewùmí, *The Invention of Women*, 122.
[87] Sylvia Walby et al., "Intersectionality: Multiple Inequalities in Social Theory," *Sociology* 2, (2012), 227.
[88] Brewer, "Theorizing Race, Class and Gender," 33.

are transformed by the political and economic changes in the Senegal colony across the nineteenth century.

Building off of the timeline of these changes detailed in Chapter One, this chapter is divided into three periods across the long nineteenth century. The first section spans between the late eighteenth century and 1817, representing the height of the illicit trade, the tumult from the Napoleonic Wars, and the years directly preceding the more organized French imperial project. The second section, set between 1817 and 1860, picks up with the arrival of French missionaries to Saint Louis, the installation of the French resident merchants and the fall of the illicit trade, and the formalized Catholic education of women of color. This portion of the chapter includes a more in-depth analysis of Emile de Girardin's *Une Signare* feuilleton series from 1841, providing a vital checkpoint in the development of French attitudes towards race, gender, and class only seven years before the abolition of slavery. The final section covers from 1860 to 1891, primarily corresponding to the expanding Catholic mission starting in the 1860s. In each of these three sections, primary source materials are grouped based on their date of publication, correlating them with the economic, social, and political changes detailed in the first chapter.[89] While each source is a time capsule for the French colonial consciousness at its given point in the long nineteenth century, mapping these sources out along a timeline allows us to see how attitudes changed or remained the same over time in response to the rapidly changing colonial situation in urban coastal French Senegal.

[89] Due to limited access to archives during the COVID-19 pandemic, all of the visual sources analyzed in this chapter were drawn from Xavier Ricou's 2007 primary source collection titled *Trésors de l'iconographie du Sénégal colonial*.

Late Eighteenth Century to 1817: Early Formalization of the French Colonial Agenda

Figure 4. Négresse de qualité de l'Isle St-Louis dans le Sénegal, accompagnée de son esclave.[90]

The first two visual primary sources come from the late eighteenth and very early nineteenth centuries. Figure 4 was designed by the diplomat and etcher Jacques Grasset de Saint-Sauveur and engraved by a little-known artist named Labrousse in late eighteenth-century Paris. Saint-Sauveur served as a French diplomat in Hungary and Cairo and wrote numerous ethnographies

[90] Figure 4, de Saint-Sauveur, Jacques Grasset, "Négresses de qualité de l'Isle St-Louis dans le Sénégal, accompagné de son esclave," engraving, late eighteenth-century, In *Trésors de l'iconographie du Sénégal colonial*, by Xavier Ricou, Figure C1, Paris: Riveneuve éditions, 2007.

and novels about the people and places he encountered.[91] However, there is very little, if any, source material that suggests he visited Senegal.[92] To this end, while his engravings and illustrations purported to ethnographically document clothing, culture, and behavior from numerous sites across the globe, his role in French international relations and his lack of contact with Senegal or its inhabitants calls his objectivity in Figure 4 into question.

This *signare* is depicted wearing a modest white dress, a pink cloth wrapped around her waist and her left shoulder, and delicate yellow slippers. Her headpiece is not the conical headdress associated with the *signares* in the nineteenth century but paired with her sumptuous garments and the subtle jewelry around her neck, the *signare's* wealth is understated but obvious. Behind her, a slave dressed only in a blue cloth around her waist and a string of beads across her bare breasts carries an empty bowl in one hand and a parasol in the other. The *signare* holds a nude baby's hand as it struggles to walk beside her, but it is unclear whether the baby belongs to the *signare* or to the slave woman because all three figures share the same dark complexion. The slave woman's bare breasts and feet compared to the *signare's* modest fabrics and yellow slippers immediately indicates a difference in wealth and therefore social status between these figures. This differential is emphasized by the slave woman holding the parasol over the *signare's* head to shade her from the sun and from the *signare* adjusting her flowy garments with her free hand. The *case de paille*, or straw-roofed hut, and the palm tree in the background tie

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[91] "Jacques Grasset de Saint-Sauveur," *The British Museum.* https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG152692. (accessed February 8, 2022).

[92] There is scant evidence on how he obtained the impression of urban coastal Senegal pictured above, especially since there is little proof that suggests he traveled to Senegal. However, his study of Native Americans in Baja, California, was based on the writings of a Jesuit priest who worked there, suggesting that his other ethnographic works, like this one, were based on primary source materials from other European men who lived on-site. In this way, not only was the portrait of the signare in Figure 3 designed and engraved by European men, but it was based on another account by a third European man, adding another layer of distance between the artist and the subject–and from the signares to us. Albert Elsasser, "Grasset de Saint-Sauveur and the Indians of Baja California," The Journal of California Anthropology 3, no. 2 (December 1976): 33.

these figures to Africa, but the scope of the image is so limited that the only impressions we receive of Senegal's landscape are of tropicality and crudeness.

What do this sparse background and these women's apparent class differences tell us about French perspectives at the end of the eighteenth century? First, Figure 4's limited frame and vague background support the idea that Saint-Sauveur never visited Senegal. On one hand, his illustration of two small huts and a palm tree demonstrates his unfamiliarity with his subject, but on the other, it highlights what a French man thousands of miles away *imagined* as the hallmarks of coastal Senegal. Palm trees and *cases de paille* did exist in Senegal in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but as the sole topographical landmarks for Senegal in this engraving, they moreover exemplify the exoticization of African landscapes. Concerning the women's class differences, intersectionality theory tells us that class difference cannot exist without influences from race and gender, but Figure 4 offers little to go on in these respects. Both the slave woman and the *signare* are equally marked by their possession of breasts and dark complexions, but the *signare* is associated with wealth, elite status, and modesty while the Black slave woman is associated with poverty, servitude, and immodesty. From Chapter One, we understand that the *signares'* wealth and elite social status originated from their ability to marry Frenchmen within heteronormative marital traditions and from their useful knowledge of African medicines, cultures and languages. Saint-Sauveur might have created this image with this historical context, but he does not embed any evidence of it in this engraving. The audience's inability to trace these class differences past the obvious associations between the *signare* and elitism and the Black slave woman and servitude suggests that the French perspective behind this work was not part of a formalized political agenda. Because womanhood and Blackness are simultaneously found in a wealthy, socially elite figure and a poor, servile individual, race and

gender can be understood as having somewhat fluid class associations in the late eighteenth century. Blackness and womanhood are both rich and poor, modest and immodest, and elite and low-class, effectively neutralizing any pejorative or approbatory class associations with either in of this image. To this end, Figure 4 predates any coherent French agenda and embodies one man's interest in a distant, "exotic" land and its peoples.

Figure 5. 1. Négresse esclave. 2. Signare de l'Isle St. Louis. 3. Marabou ou Prêtre du Pays. 4. Nègre armé en guerre. 5. Négresse esclave portant son enfant.[93]

[93] Figure 5, "1. Négresse esclave. 2. Signare de l'Isle St. Louis. 3. Marabou ou Prêtre du Pays. 4. Nègre armé en guerre. 5. Négresse esclave portant son enfant," engraving, 1801, In *Trésors de l'iconographie du Sénégal colonial*, by Xavier Ricou, Figure C3, Paris: Riveneuve éditions, 2007.

The second source from this period, Figure 5 (1801), presents a strikingly similar background to Figure 4: one large *case de paille* and a tall palm tree framing the right and top edges of the scene. This piece is one of (if not *the*) only portraits of a *signare* that were engraved by a woman. Madame Jourdan, here signing as "Fme Jourdan," was a French engraver operating in Paris from roughly 1780 to 1800.[94] Not much is known about the influences for her work, nor whether she designed this piece, but considering that she engraved images of distant places like Switzerland and Senegal in her brief, twenty-year career, it is likely that she had also never visited the places she engraved. This explanation is corroborated by the engraving's limited frame and the repetition of the palm tree and the *case de paille* symbols from Figure 4. Considering that this engraving of a *signare* was published in Jean-Baptiste Léonard Durand's *Atlas pour servir au voyage du Sénégal*, it must have been considered ethnographic by her French audience. However, "ethnography" is a tricky term because it implies a detached objectivity that is seldom, if ever, found in sources composed by human beings. I refer to this quality in written and visual works as the *artifice of objectivity*. To look past its artifice of objectivity, Figure 4 must be treated as an exemplary representation of what the French *believed* about Senegal and its inhabitants at the turn of the nineteenth century–not as an objective, unbiased report.

Here, five figures are labeled from right to left: "1. Black slave woman 2. Signare from the Island of St Louis 3. *Marabout* or Country Preacher 4. Armed Black man 5. Black slave woman carrying her child–1801."[95] Because every person shares the same dark complexion and the *signare* wears the earlier version of the *signarial* headdress, it is reasonable to conclude that

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[94] "Madame Jourdan," *The British Museum*. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG33293. (accessed February 8, 2022). ; *Catalogue of a collection of engravings, etchings and lithographs by women.* (New York City: The De Vinne Press, 1901), 48.

[95] A *marabout*, or "marabou" in French, is a Muslim holy man.

Figure 5 depicts a very early *signare* like the one engraved in Figure 4.[96] The two Black slave women have cloths tied around their waists and bare breasts; one even wears her beads across her chest and holds a parasol over the *signare's* head like the Black slave woman depicted in Figure 3. The armed Black man is partially covered by the woman holding her child, and he carries a spear, a gun, and a sword strapped across his nude torso. All three of these figures are situated towards the outer margins of the scene, and none of them are wearing shoes. At the center of the image, a *marabout* speaks to the *signare* wearing robes with long sleeves and a fringed hem, sandals, and a cloth tied around his forehead. The *signare's* headwear paired with her shiny jewelry, her flowy clothing, and her delicate slippers lend themselves to an air of reserved affluence. The juxtaposition of the Black slave women's nudity with the *signare's* modest luxury represents a class divide based on the *signares'* wealth and modesty vis-à-vis the Black slave women's purported poverty and indecency. While flowing garments, shoes, and jewelry clearly represent wealth simply by virtue of possessing items that are rare within the frame of the image, the idea of Black female nudity representing indecency will be covered more thoroughly in the third chapter. Perhaps most importantly, though, the *signare* and the Black woman's shared and equivalent physical Blackness indicates that while Blackness was associated with inferiority, it was not considered an irredeemable inferiority. If Blackness could exist both in poverty and in wealth, in indecency and in decency, then class as it pertained to Black womanhood in the early nineteenth century can be understood as somewhat fluid. This same idea applies to their shared womanhood: if womanhood could exist in figures who embodied the elite *and* slave categories of society, then womanhood, too, was a somewhat flexible identity in class positions. While the Black man is depicted with weapons, his physical

[96] It is also important to note that this signare has the early version of the headdress also seen in Figure 3.

marginality and partial nudity in comparison with the *signares'* sartorial modesty and physical centrality asserts her class elevation relative to him. The wealth differential between the *signare* and the armed Black man suggests a more overtly gendered basis for her elite social status, but it similarly originates from out-of-frame circumstances and does not overtly involve race.

The designer for this image emphasizes *signarial* connections to Africa by literally and figuratively centering her interaction with the *marabout*, or Muslim holy man, in Figure 5. The *marabout's* left palm opens towards the audience as if he is gesticulating mid-speech, and the *signare's* left hand is held down in front of her as if she is actively listening and welcoming his words. Though the *marabout's* decision to grab the *signare's* wrist instead of her hand might seem aggressive, her relaxed expression and their shared eye contact indicate that this gesture was socially permissible– maybe even expected. Here, the *marabout* can be understood as both an embodiment of Islam and a marker for Africa. The *marabout* and the *signare's* locked eyes, physical contact, and evident exchange of words demonstrates the perceived connection between the *signares* and Islam at the turn of the nineteenth century. While there is evidence of the *signares* mixing Islam, African fetishism, and Christianity before the 1820s, they were already considered to be Catholic by the time Figure 5 was published.[97] An interaction between a *marabout* and a *signare*, like the one pictured here, could have happened at this time, but its centrality in this piece raises questions about French perspectives on the *signares* and their relationship with religion and African culture. Why is Islam centered in this piece and not Christianity? Why does the *marabout*, embodying Islam, appear to be directing his conversation with the *signare*, and why does he assert physical dominance over her by taking hold of her wrist?

[97] See section beginning on page 23 for further discussion of the signares' relationship with Catholicism.

Islam's centrality paired with the *case de paille*, the palm tree, and the Black figures' partial nudity emphasizes the same exocitization of Senegal, the *signares*, and its inhabitants found in Figure 4. This is corroborated by the fact that racial difference is consistently inscribed in nineteenth-century European portraits of Africans due to the white colonial gaze—a gaze rooted in fantasy— of the artists who designed them. In Figures 4 and 5, it is difficult to locate the origins for the class differences between the *signare* and her counterparts due to the race and occasional gender homogeneity across the depicted individuals. In Figure 5, the *marabout's* physical centrality, modesty, and wealth indicate a more concerted effort to tie the *signares* to Africa by linking them to an embodiment of Islam; but, without explicit and consistent differences between race and gender, this effort still does not appear to have a distinct ideological thrust aside from the exoticization of the *signares* and Africa. Although the gender difference between the *signare* and the armed Black man associates womanhood with an elevated social status, the same wealth and status disparity can be found between the *signare* and the two other Black women. This reiterates the implication from Figure 3 that womanhood and Blackness had fluid associations with class at the turn of the nineteenth century. More generally, the lack of explicit race and gender-based differences among the figures depicted here indicates the lack of a unified racial and gendered political agenda and instead the more fragmentary exoticization of peoples and places far from metropolitan France. This ultimately suggests that the late-eighteenth century and the turn of the nineteenth century predated a unified, racialized, and gendered French political project in Senegal.

The striking similarities between the *signares'* clothing, the Black woman's nudity and actions, and the landscapes in Figures 4 and 5 suggest two principal possibilities. The first is that the designer for Figure 5 and Jacques Grasset de Saint-Sauveur referenced the same primary

source materials when designing and engraving their works. If this is the case, then the shared symbols between Figures 4 and 5 could be interpretations of a third biased work by another white European person who imbued their initial account with biased symbols. Reiterating the same source material across multiple illustrations treats exoticized impressions of Africa as if they were ethnographic. The second possibility is perhaps even more problematic: one of these artists could have referenced the other for their own work. This explanation is particularly persuasive because the *signare* portrayed in both images is dressed exactly the same despite the strong possibility that none of the artists or engravers had ever been to Senegal. The ribbed detailing at the bottom of the *signares'* headpieces, their droplet-shaped earrings, their beaded choker necklaces, the curved tips of their slippers, the collar of their long dresses, and the drape of their shawls is virtually identical despite the slightly different engraving styles between these pieces and the lack of color in Figure 5. Even the details of the slave woman holding the parasol and the singular palm tree along the right edge of the scene are too similar to be true if they were independently drawn from the same primary source materials. The act of referencing another artist's work would add another layer of distance between these French artists and the African subjects for their work, again perpetuating one French person's ideas of what Senegal *might* look as if they were objective fact.[98]

Option one constitutes variations on the same narrative theme; option two is direct plagiarism from a piece that was most likely based on limited, biased source materials to begin with. To be clear, *cases de paille* did exist in urban coastal Senegal, and the *signares* did own Black female slaves, but when depictions of whole societies are calcified into one limited frame, and topography and characters appear to be interations of the same blueprint, they can no longer

[98] This becomes even more problematic when considering the idea that artists like Saint-Sauveur based their works on yet another French perspective, in effect calcifying certain symbols in

be considered "ethnographic" and must instead be read for their subjective value. Figures 4 and 5 from the late-eighteenth century and the turn of the nineteenth century exemplify the basic exoticization of Senegal and its habitants, but they do not yet demonstrate any particular political thrust.

René Claude Geoffroy de Villeneuve's four-part book series on "Le Sénégal" tells a different story only thirteen years later. Published in Paris after the French regained control of Senegal in 1814, *Le Sénégal* exemplifies the written ethnography.[99] Unlike Saint-Sauveur and Madame Jourdan, however, Villeneuve took two voyages to Africa between 1785 and 1788, during which time he spent two years in "Senegal or Gorée" with then-governor Monsieur le chevalier de Boufflers.[100] Ethnographic artifices of objectivity are more difficult to unravel in this case than in Figures 4 and 5 due to Villeneuve's firsthand experiences in Senegal, but his attachment to the chevalier de Boufflers exposes his allegiance to French ventures in Africa at the time. These ventures are exemplified in the preface to his first volume: "For twenty years in Africa…one looked to study characters, the mores, the traditions, and the customs of the people who [lived in Africa]; one wanted to know the states that compose it, the revolutions they subdued. One desired to bring civilization to them."[101] Though the first line describes standard ethnographic research, the final line explicitly acknowledges a French political agenda: the civilization of Africa. Villeneuve's use of the impersonal third person pronoun "on" and the noun "l'éditeur" instead of the personal first person pronoun "je" places distance between his

[99] The Napoleonic Wars from 1803 to 1815 were winding down at this point, and France's reacquisition of Senegal signaled that the end of the conflict was near. See page 16 in Chapter One.

[100] René Claude Geoffroy de Villeneuve, *L'Afrique, ou histoire, mœurs, usages et coutumes des africains: Le Sénégal, tome premier*, (Paris: Nepveu, 1814), v.

[101] Geoffroy de Villeneuve, *Le Sénégal, tome premier*, (Paris: Nepveu, 1814), iii. Original text: "Depuis vingt ans [en] Afrique…On a cherché à étudier les caractères, les mœurs, les usages, les coutumes des peuples qui l'habitent; on a voulu connoître les Etats qui la composent, les révolutions qu'ils ont subi. On a désiré porter la civilisation parmi eux."

work and and this civilizing mission; but on pages vi and vii, he expresses his intent to "...if it is agreeable to the public… continue the history of Africa on the same plan…" Villeneuve not only contradicts the rhetorical distance he placed between himself and the French civilizing mission, but he acknowledges the French public's influence on his work. There is no space for a researcher's personal desire in a true ethnography. Moreover, there is no place for public opinion to shape or direct the course of proper ethnographic research. On both counts, Villeneuve exposes his own work's failure to meet the necessary requirements for objective research and indicates that his subsequent chapters–subsequent volumes, even– elaborate on a concerted French civilizing agenda.

The *signares* are only mentioned by name one time in his entire first volume, and they are not mentioned at all in the second, third, or fourth. Granted, Villeneuve's analysis does not focus on urban coastal Senegal, but considering the *signares'* prominence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it seems unlikely that they could occupy such a minute portion of an "ethnography" on Senegal. In just a couple short pages, they are described by their luxurious clothing and as "the women of color and the free and rich Black women" who contracted "limited marriages" with European men in ceremonies based on "Black marriage… [and] Wolof morals."[102] Though short, this description reveals something of French perspectives on racial difference and on women's (un)importance to French colonial writers. For one, like the fluid class associations depicted in Figures 4 and 5, Blackness is simultaneously associated with the wealth and elevated social status of the *signares* and the "limited" tenets of Wolof morality. Villeneuve does not explicitly call Wolof mores limited, but in describing *mariage à la mode du pays* as such, he implies that the attributes which made these marriages incomplete or

[102] De Villeneuve, *Le Sénégal, tome premier*, (Paris: Nepveu, 1814), 68-69.

substandard within the French consciousness were their connections to Wolof culture and to Blackness. However, the invocation of the *signares'* wealth is also diminished by the implication that the marriages which granted them this wealth were founded on incomplete, limited moral standards. Though they are largely implicit, these critiques of *mariage à la mode du pays*, Blackness, and one set of autochthonous morality begin to diverge from the more nuanced relationship between Blackness and class portrayed in Figures 4 and 5.

The *signares* are mentioned by name a single time in over 700 pages of text on Senegal. The brevity and superficiality of the *signares'* descriptions exemplify how African women of color–even prominent ones– were marginalized in French colonial narratives on Senegal. While this brief passage only provides a hint at changing perspectives on race, another chapter in his second volume on *Maure*, or Arab, women can help us to understand French perspectives on women of color in Senegal and how French men articulated gender, race, and class differences in 1814. This connection is especially appropriate considering the connection between Islam and the *signares* in the early French colonial consciousness demonstrated in Figure 5. The opening line of "Chapter 10: Women" is particularly telling: "The *Maures*, like all Moslems, regard women as being of an inferior type than men; [women] seem to them to be created for their pleasures and whims…"[103] Villeneuve claims that *Maure* men as a collective, and moreover all Muslims, relegated *Maure* women to secondary class status on account of their gender. He goes

[103] Geoffroy de Villeneuve, *Le Sénégal, tome deuxième*, (Paris: Nepveu, 1814), 84-85. Original quote in French: "Les Maures, commes tous les mahométans, regardent les femmes comme étant d'une espèce inférieure aux hommes; elles leurs semblent créées pour leurs plaisirs et leurs caprices…" The word "espèce" in French is difficult to translate in this context without taking some liberty in assuming French perspectives at this point in time. "Espèce" can mean "type" or "species," with the latter implying a far clearer connection to scientific racism than the former. It is possible that the term "species" was used here, indicating early examples of scientific racism as it filtered into public discourse on the Senegal colony, especially considering scientific racism was on the rise amongst early nineteenth-century European anthropologists. However, it is also possible that the translation of espèce as "species" anachronistically applies scientific racist theories before they would have traveled into French popular discourse. Out of an abundance of caution, I have thus chosen to translate "espèce" here as "type" because it is a more neutral translation.

on to explain that the absence of emotion, delicacy, and morality was associated with women in Afro-Arab culture and influenced Arab women's relegation to second-class status. Villeneuve's preoccupation with describing the *absence* of such traits as emotion and morality takes on an objective, observational tone in this passage, ostensibly describing *Maure* men's perspectives on women and not any opinion of Villeneuve's own. By planting these perspectives in the mouths and minds of *Maure* men and without providing any evidence for his claims, Villeneuve situates himself on a moral high ground concerning *Maure* women. This lays the groundwork for his next section:

> *... if [Maure women] knew what it is to love and to feel, they could maybe revive in this brutish people the chivalrous tastes which in other times rendered the Maures of Spain the models of valiance and courtliness; but soon to be depraved amongst a corrupted and perverse people… [these women] become incapable of knowing and of producing the generous sentiments of which women most often were the guides and models.*[104]

Villeneuve initially describes the purported emotionlessness of Arab women as a belief used by Arab men to subjugate women; in this passage, he coopts this emotionlessness to manufacture the need for a French civilizing mission. In his mind, Arab women needed to be taught the delicacy and emotion which implicitly thrived in French culture, and the only men suitable for the job were French. In order to demonstrate differences between the *Maures* and the French (of whom Villeneuve himself is the implicit representative), Villeneuve first describes Arab men as

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[104] De Villeneuve, *Le Sénégal, tome deuxième*, 87. Original quote in French: "... si elles savoient ce que c'est qu'aimer et sentir, elles pourroient peut-être ranimer chez ce peuple abruti ces goûts chevaleresques qui autrefois ont rendu les Maures des Espagnes des modèles de vaillance et de courtoisie; mais bientôt dépravées au milieu d'un peuple corrompu et pervers… [elles] deviennent incapables de connoitre et de produire ces sentimens généreux dont le plus souvent les femmes ont été et les guides et les modèles."

objectifying Arab women and then claims that he, as an embodiment of France, sees women as guides and models for morality. He feigns adopting the belief that *Maure* women were emotionless and devoid of morality from *Maure* men when it was Villeneuve himself who planted this belief in *Maure* men's mouths in the first place. In this way, Villeneuve first associates *Maure* non-white culture with emotionlessness, immorality, and subjugated women, and then French white culture is associated with emotion, morality, and a high esteem for women.

This passage uses women of color to manufacture a need for the French civilizing mission in Senegal. Although *Maure* women belonged to different ethnic (and sometimes racial) categories than the *signares*, Villeneuve's treatment of women, race, Islam, and Africa in this chapter yields serious implications for the evolving French consciousness. The idea that women of color could only reclaim their morality by aspiring to European standards creates space for the imposition of French morality on the inhabitants of Senegal. Villeveuve's choice in the first volume to diminish the cultural base which allowed the *signares* to gain social mobility paired with this paragraph on *Maure* immorality betrays an increasingly cogent animosity towards Blackness, indigeneity, and African womanhood in Senegal. *Le Sénégal* diverges from Figures 4 and 5 by alluding to what Villeneuve thought Senegal, its communities, and its inhabitants *ought* to be: civilized by France, Catholicism, and whiteness. This question of *ought* emphasizes Villeneuve's failure to conduct an ethnographic study and recasts *Le Sénégal* as a sort of political manifesto.

The period from the late eighteenth century to 1817 marked the slow birth of a French political agenda in Senegal. Figures 4 and 5 embody the exoticization of Senegal, the *signares*, and Black Africans, but due to their racial homogeneity and their simultaneous associations of

womanhood with class superiority and inferiority, they do not present a coherent judgment on race, gender, or class aside from the general idea that Black Africa was "other" to white France. Economically, France had long since invested in Senegal's rich supply of gum arabic and in its slave exports, but it wasn't until after the French regained control of the colony from the British in 1814 that a more sociopolitical plan began to emerge. Villeneuve's book series on Senegal presents a truncated and superficial account of the *signares*, but in just a few pages he associates Blackness, Wolof culture, and *mariage à la mode du pays* with limits and inadequacy. His chapter on women in Senegal in volume two is more extensive and associates Africa, non-whiteness, and Islam with the subjugation of women and immorality while suggesting that France represents its opposite. Villeneuve simultaneously rejects the alleged objectification of women by men in Afro-Arab culture while claiming that women ought to be models for morality and emotion. Here, Villeneuve manufactures the need for a French civilizing mission in Senegal, and his book series functions as an elaboration on this same theme.

1817 to 1840: The Rise of French Catholic Conquest

If Villeneuve's book series exemplified early calls for the French civilizing mission in 1814, then the arrival of French missionaries to Saint Louis after 1817 was an answer to that call.[105] With the reinstallation of French control in Senegal and the recent suppression of the slave trade in 1815, France sought new ways to socially, politically, and economically structure the colony. Georges Goyau, a French essayist and historian, reflects on this transitional period in his book from 1929:

> The suppression of the [slave] trade obligated us to consider colonial France like a clean slate where novelties could be developed. Mother Javouhey and the Sisters of Saint-

[105] See pages 23 and 24 in Chapter One for more on the installation of Catholic missionaries in urban coastal Senegal in 1817.

> Joseph de Cluny had to have their share in organizing these novelties. Senegal was a colony that lacked colonizers, it was a spiritual desert that lacked missionaries and even preachers… in Senegal they had to play, as it were, a role of constructors… Gorée, Saint-Louis, were nothing more at that time than commercial establishments, whose agents had very little to do with civilizing work… Moreover, throughout the hinterland, the rights of France were more theoretical than effective; the treaties on which they were based lacked precision.[106]

Thus, with the arrival of the first missionaries and the Sisters of Saint-Joseph de Cluny, the first element in the French civilizing mission was set in motion: Catholicization. As discussed in Chapter One, another critical event in 1817 altered the economic climate in urban coastal Senegal: the replacement of temporary merchants with resident merchants and the resulting decline of the illicit trade.[107] The economic and social changes starting in the 1820s consequently represented the earliest phase of the *signares'* shift out of economic power and towards the models-of-morality ideal first articulated in Villeneuve's book series. But what were the French perspectives on race, gender, and class that shaped this transitional period for the *signares*? How did those perspectives change or remain the same as the French political agenda in Senegal developed?

The primary source material on the *signares* during the 1820s and 30s is sparse at best, but a Haitian newspaper column from 1834 by an unknown author provides a few key insights pertaining to the *signares* and their relationship with the Catholic civilizing mission in the 1830s. The *signare*s are briefly mentioned between pages two and three of the paper:

> The Blacks in general are Moslems and fetishists...all of the mulatto men and women that one calls the signares are attached to the Christian religion… you see jumbled together

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[106] Georges Goyau, *Un grand "homme", mère Javouhey, apôtre des noirs; avec quatre gravures hors texte*, (Paris: Les petits-fils de Plon et Nourrit, 1929), 48. ; original quote in French: "La suppression de la traite nous obligeait à considérer la France coloniale comme une sorte de table rase où des nouveautés pouvaient s'échafauder. Mère Javouhey et les Soeurs de Saint-Joseph de Cluny devaient avoir leur part de besogne, dans l'organisation de ces nouveautés. Le Sénégal était une colonie qui manquait de colons, c'était un désert spirituel, qui manquait de missionnaires et même de prêtres… au Sénégal elles avaient à jouer, en quelque sorte, un rôle de constructrices."

[107] See Chapter One under the section "Signares, Property, and Trade" for more on the installation of resident merchants.

> the neighborhood Blacks and the Maures from the Desert who attract curiosity: then the line of signares covered and draped in their cloths in the manner of roman ladies, and then their suites of slaves also leaving the Christian temple. The mulattos and the signares are not without education; amongst them there are people remarkable for their spirit, their graces, and their talents. All of the mulattos follow European styles of dress; it is the same with the young signares, who moreover receive their instruction from the sisters of Saint-Joseph.[108]

The first mention of the *signares* notes their connection to Christianity. In comparison with the *signares'* association with Islam in Figure 5, this explicit acknowledgement of the *signares'* attachment to Christianity signals a shift in how the *signares* were perceived in the French colonial consciousness between 1801 and 1834. Moreover, the acknowledgement of this identity before any other indicates that the *signares'* connections to Catholicism might have been at the forefront of French interest in these métis women. Racial differences are incorporated into this discussion of religion, with Blackness being associated with Islam and fetishism and mixed-race identities being tied to Christianity. This is the first example of an explicit religious divide between *métis* and Black people in this chapter. *Métissage* goes relatively undiscussed in Villeneuve's piece, at least as it pertains to the *signares,* and it is not physically apparent in either of the illustrations of the *signares* in Figures 4 and 5. The divide between *métissage* and Blackness is exacerbated by the subsequent associations of Black and Arab people with disorder and curiosity and of the *signares* with order, wealth, and grace. The delicacy and spirit Villeneuve claimed African Muslim women lacked in 1814 is here associated with the *signares* and, more importantly, with the education they received from the Catholic Sisters de Saint-

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[108] "Les Soeurs de Saint-Joseph," *Feuille du commerce. Petites affiches et annonces du Port-au-Prince.* March 23, 1834. Original text: "Les noirs en général sont mahométans et fétichistes… tous les mulâtres et les mulâtresses qu'on nomme *signares* sont attachés à la religion chrétienne… vous voyez pêle-mêle accroupis la curiosité attire: puis la file des signares couvertes et drapées de leurs pagnes à la manière des dames romaines, et enfin leurs suites d'esclaves sortant aussi en ce moment du temple chrétien. Les mulâtres et les signares ne sont pas sans éducation; parmi eux il y a des personnes remarquables par leur esprit, leurs grâces, et leurs talens. Tous les mulâtres suivent dans leurs habillmens les modes européennes; il en est de même de jeunes signares, qui d'ailleurs reçoivent leur instruction des soeurs de Saint-Joseph."

Joseph de Cluny. Goyau's reflection on the 1820s seems to ring true based on their result in 1834: the Sisters of Joseph de Cluny became both missionary and colonizer in the formerly economic outpost of Saint Louis. Villeneuve implies that Afro-Arab women ought to aspire to Europeanness to become civilized, but this article provides evidence of that aspiration for the *signares* through their "European styles of dress" and their association with the Catholic religion. This is remarkably similar to Villeneuve's idea of using women as moral guides for civilization in 1814, but this column does not articulate that point directly.

Despite the author's attention to creating differences between the *signares* and Black people on account of the *signares'* proximity to whiteness, he also reminds the audience that all of these people are African and belong to an African landscape.[109] To this end, the author reveals his article's participation in the French civilizing mission: "The sisters of Saint-Joseph are the true representatives of civilization and humanity in these countries desolated by the sad spectacle of our excesses and the dreadful trade in Blacks… maybe the time to conquer Africa with evangelical laws has come!"[110] The author's self-consciousness concerning slavery comes into sharp contrast with his associations between Blackness, disorder, and exoticism one page earlier. However, his use of religious "conquest" indicates that his was not an issue with systems of dominance, but rather with the way it was branded. Instead of abolishing systems of racialized dominance, this column indicates that France should reform and rebrand under the new banner of the Catholic mission–and maybe even with the help of the *signares.*

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[109] See the passage on the third page of the newspaper describing the "tropical sun" (le soleil du tropique), "its burning sands" (son sable brûlant), and "its sky of fire" (son ciel de feu).

[110] "Les Soeurs de Saint-Joseph." Original text: "Les soeurs de Saint-Joseph sont les véritables représentans de la civilization et de l'humanité dans ces contrées désolées par le triste spectacle de nos exces et l'effroyable.traite des noirs…peut-être le temps de conquérir l'Afrique aux lois évangeliques est-il venu!"

"Une Signare I-III," 1841: Signareship as Slavery, Frenchness as Freedom

French critiques of *mariage à la mode du pays* and slavery became louder and more fervent toward the middle of the nineteenth century, but they did not become less complicated. While the aforementioned newspaper column from 1834 describes the slave trade as "dreadful," the *Une Signare* feuilleton series from 1841 presents a far lengthier and more nuanced refutation of slavery. Its subtexts about race, Africa, the *signares*, and freedom complicate the humanitarian sentiments declared throughout each of the series' three installments. *Une Signare I-III* was published in the conservative Parisian newspaper, *La Presse*, between July 21 and July 23, 1841. While the author for the series is unknown, the editor and founder of the paper, Emile de Girardin, was famous for his polemical publications and his (ultimately unsuccessful) involvement in French politics. *La Presse* was easily accessible at roughly half the price of the next closest paper, making it the first popular press in all of France.[111] De Girardin's own miscellaneous publications enjoyed "enormous circulation," indicating that as an editor, he knew precisely what to tweak to make publications as attractive as possible to French audiences.[112] This series exemplifies the drama, scandal, and biting commentary expected of such a popular press. On the one hand, this makes historical analyses tremendously difficult because objectivity is obscured by the hyperbole, sarcasm, and irony required of a popular news outlet. On the other, this series is uniquely saturated with biases from 1841 that make it an ideal source for understanding French perspectives on race, gender, and class in the years leading up to the formal abolition of slavery in 1848.

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[111] *The Encyclopedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature and General Information*, 11th ed., s.v. "de Girardin, Emile," 46.
[112] *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, 46.

As briefly discussed at the beginning of Chapter One, *Une Signare I-III* tells the story of a young *métis* girl, Eglé, and the negotiations surrounding her marriage to a white French man named Pierre Maulabour. Eglé's mother, the *signare* Mariana, is depicted as jealous, tyrannical, and obsessed with gold; Eglé's marriage to Maulabour is even described in terms of a sale because of Mariana's drive to obtain money from her daughter's marriage.[113] "Eglé is giving me grief!" Mariana exclaims in the first installment. "She doesn't understand that there is but one true thing in the world, the possession of a certain quantity of money. Love deceives; a chest full of beautiful money does not deceive!"[114] In contrast, Pierre Maulabour is portrayed as a surprisingly self-aware figure who explicitly rejects the characteristics of the quintessential white male colonizer and adheres to a moral code defined by generosity, delicacy, and an opposition to slavery. Early in the second installment, he claims, "I am not one of these old blasé and libertine settlers who buys concubines for gold, all too happy to buy a submissive slave or a clever mistress. I would be ashamed to commit violence against such a delicate heart."[115] Eglé, the *métis* daughter to the *signare* Mariana and the French chevalier de Boufflers, is the delicate heart to which this quote refers.[116] In the first two installments, she wrestles with her desire to please her mother and with her distress at the thought of being sold to a man for the rest of her life. In the third installment, she achieves her dream of purchasing her own freedom, but after finding

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[113] Une Signare I.

[114] Une Signare I. Original text: "Eglé me donnera du chagrin! Elle ne comprend pas qu'il n'y a qu'une chose vraie au monde, la possession d'une certaine quantité d'or. L'amour trompe; un coffre plein de belles valeurs monnayées ne trompe pas!"

[115] Une Signare II. Original text: "Je ne suis point un de ces vieux colons blasés et libertins qui achètent des concubines à prix d'or, trop heureux d'avoir une esclave soumise ou une adroite maîtresse. Je serais honteux de faire violence à un coeur si délicat."

[116] The chevalier de Boufflers was a real person who was famously involved with a signare, Anne Pépin, during his tenure as governor in Senegal. De Girardin and the author of this series would have most certainly been aware of this figure, and could have invoked his name to promote controversy and increase sales.

herself exhausted and dying in the countryside weeks later, she is saved by Monsieur Maulabour who agrees to take her to Paris to be married *à la française*.

This series centers on three key topics, each revealing critical perspectives on race, gender, and class in 1841: Eglé and Mariana's relationships to whiteness and to Blackness, the comparison of *signareship* to slavery, and the institution of *mariage à la mode du pays*. None of these topics are mutually exclusive, much like the analytical categories used to interrogate them, but they can be useful for tracing French perspectives underneath the dramatized extraneous details of a feuilleton. Perhaps the most obvious references to Eglé and Mariana's relationships with race occur in the first and second installments. On the first page of the first installment, the narrator explains Mariana's inner struggle over her and Eglé's social standings:

> Mariana wasn't completely a slave, but if she was white of skin, she was Black from the first blood; and her daughter was, like her, a woman of color that a white man could love, buy, or seduce, but that he could not marry in Paris. Eglé was destined for one of these unions that the customs of the land authorized, but to which the law assigned no value; she couldn't be the legitimate wife of an honest man in France, she had to be in Gorée a mistress, or, if they wanted, the natural wife of a European to whom she would be sold.[117]

In this passage, Blackness is associated with slavery, and in possessing Black blood, Mariana's social status is shifted on the spectrum between white freedom and Black slavery towards the latter. Mariana and Eglé's proximity to whiteness through their *métissage* allowed white men to love or seduce them, but it was ultimately their proximity to Blackness which, in Mariana's French-constructed mind, prevented the *signares* from being married to Frenchmen under French customs. *Signareship* is here understood as a social class *close* to white womanhood but never,

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[117] Une Signare I. Original quote in French: "Mariana n'était pas tout-à-fait une esclave, mais si elle était blanche de peau, elle était noire par le premier sang; et sa fille était, comme elle, une femme de couleur qu'un blanc pouvait aimer, acheter ou séduire, mais qu'il ne pouvait pas épouser à Paris. Eglé était destinée à une de ces unions que la coutume du pays autorisait, mais auxquelles la loi ne reconnaissait aucune valeur; elle ne pouvait être en France femme légitime d'un honnête homme, elle devait être à Gorée maîtresse, ou, si l'on veut, épouse naturelle d'un Européen à qui on la vendrait."

under any circumstances, *equivalent* to it. Whiteness is linked to legal recognition and marriage under French customs while Blackness is associated with slavery, seduction, objectification, and *mariage à la mode du pays*. Mariana is convinced that Eglé's connection to Blackness prohibits her from aspiring to Frenchness, settling for "sell[ing]" Eglé as a *signare* to Monsieur Maulabour. Blackness is thus understood as a physical and class-based degeneration of whiteness.

The idea of the first blood, or "le premier sang," is reiterated elsewhere by Eglé as she tries to reconcile with her mother's determination to "sell" her to Monsieur Maulabour:

> French blood having fought against African blood, the latter prevails. Now they like me better that way, they wanted it; so gold, gold, sir, because this is a market, let's not forget it. It's an object, a thing, a piece of furniture they want to sell and of which you are the buyer… It's as a slave that I want to belong to you, not as a mistress… Within two years, you can be sure of it, I will have acquired at your business more than four hundred ounces of gold. When everything is done, when it has been well established that your slave has freed herself, your slave will become free again: I will thus be Eglé, daughter of Monsieur de Boufflers…[118]

Here, Blackness is tied more explicitly to Africa as "African blood," revealing the equivalency drawn between Blackness and Africa within the French colonial consciousness. Thus, like the racial designation of Blackness, the ethnic designation of Africanness is also associated with objectification. Eglé's first phrase is a reiteration of Mariana's understanding of race and class from the previous passage, and when Pierre Maulabour tells Eglé that he cannot consent to purchasing her as a slave, Mariana is cast as the villain in this narrative for pushing Eglé to the point of demanding enslavement. Maulabour does not contest Mariana's belief that Blackness is

[118] Une Signare II. Original text: "Le sang français avait lutté contre le sang africain, celui-ci l'emporte. Maintenant on m'aime comme cela, on l'a voulu; de l'or donc, de l'or, monsieur, car il s'agit d'un marché, ne l'oublions pas. C'est un objet, une chose, un meuble qu'on veut vendre et dont vous êtes l'acheteur… C'est comme une esclave que je veux vous appartenir, non comme une maîtresse… Avant deux ans, soyez-en sûr, j'aurai acquis à votre commerce plus de quatre cents onces d'or. Quand les choses en seront là, quand il sera bien établi que votre esclave s'est rachetée, votre esclave redeviendra libre: je serai alors Eglé, fille de M. de Boufflers…"

a physical and social degeneration of whiteness, but he actively pushes back against purchasing Eglé as a slave. In this way, the author plants overtly racist ideas in Mariana's mouth and uses Pierre Maulabour's white male voice to refute the ideas that did not align with the French colonial agenda in 1841. In this way, slavery is revealed to have fallen out of fashion within the white French colonial consciousness. The white Frenchman, Pierre Maulabour, is thus the honorable, delicate, and "humane" foil to the woman of color, Mariana, who is characterized by greed, racism, and tyranny. In relation to these two characters, Eglé becomes a sort of damsel in distress, plagued by her mother's avarice and by limited African customs like *mariage à la mode du pays*. The relationship between these three characters can be understood as an imperfect familial pyramid, where Eglé's absent biological father is replaced by the paternal figure of her white French husband. In "rescuing" Eglé from her mother's tyranny and from her inability to survive freedom by herself, Pierre Maulabour embodies the white savior, promising Eglé to whisk her away from the pain and confusion the author associates with Africa. However, this *mariage à la française* is never realized within the scope of the series, representing a promise for equality that is never fully realized. The unrealized promise of a French marriage exemplifies the idea that the *signares ought* to aspire to whiteness by rejecting *signareship*, *mariage à la mode du pays*, and the degenerative force of her own Blackness, but that it is precisely this Blackness which will always prevent her from achieving the class status she seeks.

The inscriptions of race, gender, and class differences in this series are difficult to unravel because the author presents them using a sort of literary ventriloquism. Mariana pushes for *signareship*, *mariage à la mode du pays*, and the importance of money over love; Eglé's struggles with her mother's greed and and with her own hopes for freedom highlight the problems with Mariana's perspective; and Pierre Maulabour openly rejects slavery while subtly

accepting Mariana's ideas on race, gender, and class differences. By staging the first two installments of his series as a debate, the author disperses his perspectives among all three principal characters and has them accept or reject the ideas which serve the French political agenda. It is critical to recognize that Mariana and Eglé are not real *signares*. Like the *signares* engraved in Figures 3 and 4, Mariana and Eglé represent what the French author believed about the *signares*, not what real *signares* actually thought, said, or did. The author not only constructs an image of two *signares* in this series– he *mimics* them. He plants his own thoughts in their minds and his own voice in their mouths, creating the illusion of autonomous characters when in reality, they are projections of the white male colonial consciousness masquerading as women of color. This mimicry is dangerous because it creates the illusion that this story is based on core truths, but, like the artistic analyses conducted with Figures 3 and 4, it freezes French biases in place and allows us to access them centuries later.

Une Signare I-III builds off of the perspectives on slavery and civilization articulated in the 1834 *Feuille du commerce* column. Maulabour rejects slavery for Eglé and Eglé rejects *signareship* for herself because both options are seen as disgraceful for a woman with a racial and social connection to whiteness. Eglé's situation in the narrative as an imperfect damsel in distress and Mariana's role as a tyrannical, avaricious villain manufactures the need for a savior– a role which the white French Monsieur Maulabour gladly accepts. This can be taken as a symbol for France's colonial intervention in Senegal. The associations of Blackness with disorder and exoticism in the *Feuille du commerce* evolve into connections between Blackness, slavery, objectification, and physical and social degeneration in this feuilleton series. Although Catholicism is not mentioned, the feuilleton series' attacks on *mariage à la mode du pays* embody Catholic attacks on African-style marriages without mentioning the Church by name.

For a colony which purportedly lacked colonizers in the late 1810s, this feuilleton from *La Presse* demonstrates how the French colonial mission had focused on *mariage à la mode du pays* and *signareship* as threats to its progress, indicating a more organized colonial effort by the early 1840s.

1841 to 1860: Emergence of the "Declining Signare" Narrative

A decade after the abolition of slavery in 1848, a French officer to Senegal named Victor Verneuil published a book called *Mes aventures au Sénégal* describing his experiences in Gorée, Saint Louis, and the interior of the continent.[119] The 1850s marked the first decade of French imperial conquest in Senegal, and considering Verneuil was an officer who published his book in 1858, his findings can be considered a product of French colonial perspectives from the 1850s.[120] His narrative is centered on his own experiences and does not purport to be an objective ethnography; instead, it embraces its opinionated subjectivity through the use of the personal first person pronoun "je." The scholar Thomas Albert Hale describes it as a "rather lighthearted narrative…[that] served to convey the exotic cultural landscape of Africa and its diaspora to European readers fascinated by unknown lands."[121] Hale overlooks the *signares* as a tool for the exoticization of Africa in Verneuil's work and, moreover, as a group of people who might have disagreed with the idea that Verneuil's work was "lighthearted." However, Verneuil's first description of the *signares* appears early in the book, discussing his experiences at one of the famous *signarial* balls:

> [T]he signares, the ladies of the party, were hardly less bizarre than their entourage. Seeing their pyramidal headdresses, their yellow complexion, their sad and mystical air, I

[119] As mentioned in Chapter One, the 1850s marked the first French military expansions into the interior of Africa.
[120] See Chapter One for more on the imperial expansion of the 1850s.
[121] Thomas Albert Hale, *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 247. A griot is a West African storyteller and oral historian.

> believed I was attending a sabbath and found myself in the midst of a troupe of magicians. I wanted to back out, but, seized by the collar by the mistress of the house, a vigorous mulatto in the prime of life, I was well obligated to stay… Despite my resistance, I saw myself as obligated to dance with the mulatto who had so rudely welcomed me when I entered her living room. My dancer was already struggling in front of me for a long time, and I remained still…[122]

The words "bizarre," "mystical," and "magicians" explicitly exoticize the *signares,* and the author's emphases on their skin color, their trademark headdresses, and their rough decorum further distance them from French high society. Racial difference is highlighted through the "yellow complexion" noted early in the passage and the repetition of the word "mulatto" two times in as many lines. The *signare's* rough physicality, her rude welcome, and her drive to dance in front of Verneuil highlight the *signares'* distance from white French women who were expected to be poised, calm, and modest around 1858.[123] The *signare's* dance with Verneuil is not a graceful sign of her elite class status but rather a "struggle" that turns her into an object of pity and revulsion. Verneuil's inclusion of the word "sad" when describing the *signares'* "mystical air" adds another layer to this portrait, but it isn't until much later when the origins of this sadness become clear:

> ... [the signares'] daughters rejected the old, simple, and economical costume; they do their hair in a French-style hat, wear silk and cashmere dresses, items that are too expensive in Senegal. Their sons, following progress, desert the colony to come to Paris where they have to be maintained at great cost. Treasures are emptying out and not refilling; because these ladies' revenues are not considerable: their wealth, albeit immense, counts for little. Their opulence will be eclipsed soon. Staying in Senegal, abandoned by their young compatriots who, once in Paris, don't love anyone but white women, the young mulatto women will be deserving of pity. To make matters worse,

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[122] Victor Verneuil, *Mes aventures au Sénégal: souvenirs de voyage*, (Paris: Bourdilliat Jaccottet, 1858), 18-19. Original text: "Enfin les signardes, les dames de la fête, n'étaient guère moins bizarres que leur entourage. En voyant leurs coiffures pyramidales, leur teint jaune, leur air triste et mystique, je crus assister à un sabbat et me trouver au milieu d'une troupe de magiciennes. Je voulais reculer, mais, saisi au collet par la maîtresse du logis, vigoureuse mulâtresse dans la force de l'âge, je fus bien obligé de rester… Malgré ma résistance, je me vis obligé de danser avec la mulâtresse qui m'avait si rudement accueilli lors mon entrée dans son salon. Ma danseuse se démenait déjà depuis longtemps devant moi, et je restais toujours immobile…"

[123] This can be seen in nineteenth-century portraits of white French women.

> they can no longer, under the Christian empire, contract those marriages which had comforted their mothers.[124]

Here, differences are not only implied between the *signares* and white French people, but they are defined between the *signares* and their own *métis* children. Daughters rejecting *signarial* styles of dress and sons leaving Senegal altogether create the impression of the *signares* being left behind by younger generations aspiring to white Frenchness. The imagery of treasures running out but not being replaced, especially paired with the explicit note that "their opulence will be eclipsed soon," portrays *signareship* as a position in decline. The final line indirectly references *mariage à la mode du pays,* and because the *signares'* wealth and status were built on this style of marriage, its prohibition under the French Christian empire further destabilized the basis for *signareship*. This line recalls the feuilleton series' rejection of *mariage à la mode du pays* in 1841 and the *Feuille du commerce's* call for the religious conquest of Africa in 1834. This passage suggests that both these demands for the civilization of Africa were answered by the French political mission in the 1850s. Considering this narrative is based on one French man's limited experiences, it is unlikely that *mariage à la mode du pays* was as cleanly eliminated as Verneuil suggests. However, the most important takeaway from this source is the idea that *signareship* had gone from exemplifying the refined qualities of a "roman lady" in 1834 to symbolizing "exotic" Africa barely over two decades later. Race is involved in this linkage between the *signares*, exoticism, and Africa, but because *métis* daughters and sons were able to aspire to white Frenchness, the role of *signareship* itself is posited as the hindrance to *métis*

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[124] Verneuil, *Mes souvenirs au Sénégal*, 89. Original text: "...leurs filles ont rejeté l'ancien costume simple et économique; elles se coiffent maintenant du chapeau à la française, portent des robes de soie et des cachemires, choses fort chères au Sénégal. Leurs fils, suivant le progrès, désertent la colonie pour venir à Paris où il faut les entretenir à grands frais. Les trésors se vident et ne se remplissent pas; car les revenus de ces dames ne sont pas considérables: leurs richesses, quoique immenses, rapportent peu. Leur opulence s'éclipsera bientôt. Restant au Sénégal, abandonnées par leurs jeunes compatriotes qui, une fois à Paris, n'aiment plus que les femmes blanches, les jeunes mulâtresses seront bien à plaindre. Pour comble de malheur, elles ne peuvent plus, sous l'empire du christianisme, contracter de ces mariages qui consolaient leurs mères."

women's aspirations to whiteness. In adopting French styles of dress, the *signares' métis* daughters are described in more favorable terms than their mothers due to their rejection of African customs and their attempts to assimilate into the French ethnic body. As the French civilizing mission progressed, Verneuil insinuates, *signareship* was being left behind as an antiquated relic of an uncivilized African past. This adds to the idea of "abandonment" explicitly articulated in the passage above. In Verneuil's mind, the *signares* were not only being left behind by their children– they were being left behind by the future of their own country.

1860 to 1891: Not Quite African and Not Quite French

The fact that *signares* were still being described and depicted from the 1860s to the 1890s indicates that the *signares* were not left behind as easily as Verneuil expected. However, as the French civilizing mission progressed with the expansion of Catholic "conquest," the *signares'* place in French colonial urban coastal Senegal lost much of its flexibility.

Figure 6. Intérieur d'une maison, à Gorée.[125]

[125] Figure 6, De Bérard, Emile, "Intérieur d'une maison, à Gorée," engraving, 1861, In *Trésors de l'iconographie du Sénégal colonial,* by Xavier Ricou, Figure C17, Paris: Riveneuve éditions, 2007.

Figure 7. Cour intérieure d'une maison de Gorée.[126]

Figures 6 and 7 return to the realm of ostensible ethnography in the 1860s. Figure 6, *Intérieur d'une maison à Gorée*, was published in the French travel journal *Le Tour du Monde* in 1861– only three years after the publication of Verneuil's book. Figure 7, *Cour intérieure d'une maison de Gorée*, was published in 1867, six years after Figure 6, in the French news magazine *Le Monde Illustré*. While Figures 6 and 7 were engraved by different artists, Verdeil and Linton respectively, they were designed by the same man: Émile de Bérard. Not much is known about Bérard, but considering he submitted his works to two French news outlets, it is reasonable to conclude that Bérard could have been a Frenchman. It is unknown whether he visited Senegal or

[126] Figure 7, De Bérard, Emile, "Intérieur d'une maison, à Gorée," engraving, 1867, In *Trésors de l'iconographie du Sénégal colonial*, by Xavier Ricou, Figure C16, Paris: Riveneuve éditions, 2007.

based his works on hearsay, but in either case, these pieces' ethnographic style allows us to understand what visual markers exemplified Senegal within the French consciousness at the time. Even more, travel journal illustrations like Figure 6 might have included more overt examples of exoticization in order to garner more interest in a location from European readers, so Figure 6 must be treated with particular attention to biased imagery. By comparing two works bookending the 1860s, we can assess how French perspectives towards race, gender, and class in urban coastal Senegal changed or remained the same over the course of the decade.

Considering these images' similarities, Figures 6 and 7 feature at least one *signare*, Black women, and strikingly similar architecture. A *case en dur* along the left and right borders of each image creates the insulated atmosphere of a large courtyard. Topless women move around the ground floor of the courtyard carrying baskets on their heads, leaning against walls, or conversing amongst themselves. The figure of a topless woman churning butter is repeated in both images–even her arm position and her headwrap are the same. Farm animals like goats and chickens graze around the edges of the courtyard floor while smaller birds are seen flying in the sky or perching on the roofs of the *cases en dur*. At least one *signare* stands on the balcony in both images, overlooking the courtyard floor with little birds flying overhead or perched on her arm. The associations between the *signares* and the upper class and Black women and the lower class are illustrated in the elevation differences between the *case en dur* balcony and the courtyard floor. Grouping the *signares* with small, flighted birds and the Black women with barnyard animals indirectly emphasizes this same point. These similarities suggest that through the 1860s, the distinct class hierarchy of the *signares* above Black women remained stable. Considering 1861 and 1867 were well over a decade after the abolition of slavery, the consistent

and clear class differential between the *signares* and the Black women in the courtyard indicates the maintenance of pre-abolition class hierarchies in the post-abolition era.

The changes between these two figures also support the idea that the class hierarchy between the *signares* and Black women was maintained across the 1860s. In Figure 6, the same *case de paille* and palm tree imagery found in Figures 4 and 5 is repeated in the middle and lower right of the image; in Figure 7, these symbols are erased and replaced with a lower wooden balcony and expensive-looking cloths draped over the railings. The peacock perched on the roof of the *case en dur* in Figure 6 is also replaced in Figure 7 by three new *signares* leaning against a railing wearing bright yellow, red, and green dresses. While there is no known record on why these changes were made, Bérard might have realized the stereotypical nature of the *cases de paille* and the palm tree and the overt exoticism of the peacock and sought to redesign his composition in a more ethnographic style. However, there is little basis for this explanation considering the precedent for mixing stereotypical imagery with ethnographic portraits in French engravings of nineteenth-century Senegal. This leads to a second possible reason for these changes: his endeavor to release Figure 7 in a different publication necessitated revising Figure 6 to reflect a slightly different scene. This revision might have taken real historical changes in colonial architecture into account. The replacement of the *cases de paille* with elaborations to the *case en dur* could represent the urbanization and Europeanization of Gorée across the 1860s. In any case, though, the replacement of the peacock with three new *signares* suggests that the *signares* were viewed as symbols of Africa's exoticism; peacocks and *signares* could thus be swapped, one for the other, without losing the rhetorical impact of exotic imagery. The women in these engravings also go from having dark complexions in Figure 6 to sporting light complexions in Figure 7, but the lack of distinguishable racial difference between the *signare* and the women

in the courtyard in both images indicates that Bérard did not intend to center racial difference alongside the class hierarchy between the *signares* and the Black women. In this way, the *signares* are portrayed as equally part of an African landscape where they are considered more elite than the women working in the courtyard, but not so elite as to transcend their connection to Africa. The substitution of the *cases de paille* with the low wooden deck brings the back of the courtyard in Figure 6 closer to the audience in Figure 7, highlighting the elevation difference between the *signares* and the Black women in the courtyard and their similar complexions. In this way, the architectural change between the two images does not indicate a shift in Bérard's message, but rather emphasizes it by bringing it closer to the viewer.

One common thread does exist between Verneuil's account and Bérard's illustrations: the strong association between *signareship* and Africa. While Verneuil's book explicitly describes this connection as an antiquated one, Bérard's engravings more neutrally present the *signares* as a marker of an exoticized African landscape. In this way, Bérard's piece is not a complete departure from Verneuil's personal account, nor even from the feuilleton series from 1841. However, in comparison with Verneuil's strongly worded account from 1858, these two images present a far more nuanced portrayal of the *signares* and their positions in urban coastal society. While Verneuil describes the *signares'* impending decline and abandonment in 1858, these images maintain the *signares'* elite status at least until 1867. Furthermore, the relative marginalization of race in Bérard's depiction of the class differences between the *signares* and the Black women in the courtyard suggests that the French had conflicting ideas on how to understand the *signares'* racial and cultural liminality in the developing French colonial project of the 1860s.

In 1890, Henri-Nicolas Frey published a book called *Côte occidentale d'Afrique* which elaborates on this same question: where did the *signares* fit in the formalized French colonial project? Frey was a lifelong leader in the French military, rising through the ranks from second-lieutenant to general by the end of his life. While his military career also took him to Vietnam, Sudan, and Madagascar, he served in Senegal twice–first in 1874 as a captain, and then again in the late 1880s as a colonel.[127] *Côte occidental d'Afrique* claims to objectively capture snapshots of West Africa, including Senegal, from his time working there in the 1880s. However, it is precisely his leadership in the French imperial army which precludes him from any objectivity when discussing the lands and peoples he helped colonize. His book is thus an ideal time capsule for French biases about race, gender, and class in Senegal towards the end of the nineteenth century. In his section titled "Un bal de signares à Saint-Louis," Frey passionately describes the *signares'* relationship with French fashion: "In Senegal, as well as in our other colonies, it is not always with impunity that the feminine indigenous element sacrifices to the eccentricities of fashion, and such signare[,] truly ravishing in her morning slip or in her rich *national costume,* becomes a laughingstock, when she wants to adorn herself according to the whims of Parisian fashion." [128] As in Victor Verneuil's book from 1858, Frey associates the *signares* with indigeneity and Africa instead of whiteness or Frenchness. In Verneuil's book, this meant that the role of *signareship* held *métis* women back from aspiring to white Frenchness due to its associations with Blackness and Africa. This same argument could be applied here, where a

[127] Calames, *Fonds Henri Nicolas Frey*, (January 8, 2018), distributed by the Répertoire de fonds pour l'histoire et la philosophie des sciences et des techniques, https://rhpst.huma-num.fr/items/show/355.

[128] Henri-Nicolas Frey, *Côte occidentale de l'Afrique: vues, scènes, croquis*, (Paris: Marpon et Flammarion, 1890), 14. Original text "Au Sénégal, aussi bien d'ailleurs que dans nos autres colonies, ce n'est pas toujours impunément que l'élément féminin indigène sacrifie aux excentricités de la mode, et tell signare vraiment ravissante dans son *négligé du matin* ou dans son riche *costume national*, devient un objet de risée, lorsqu'elle veut se parer selon les caprices de l'élégance parisienne."

signare fully passing as a Parisian woman is impossible in Frey's eyes due to her contradictory belonging to Africa (through cultural traditions like *mariage à la mode du pays*). Alternatively, Frey's rejection of a *signare* in Parisian clothes could represent a decline in the encouragement for *métis* people to aspire to whiteness and Frenchness. His description of the *signares'* relationship with Christianity elsewhere in his book sheds light on this issue:

> … the Signare stands out for her instructive collection: her former slaves, the Wolofs, who she converted to the Christian faith, accompany her [to church] and sing hymns composed by missionaries… [The signares] had an honorable career, full of devotion, bravery, integrity, so that they could compare themselves to the most favored individuals of any origin in any country of the world… Far from me thus, I repeat, is the thought of discouraging or discrediting these individuals in particular, especially since I consider amongst my friends the mulattos for whom I have affection and esteem… [129]

Here, Frey describes the *signares'* roles in the Christianization of Senegal as "honorable," and even claims to consider mulatto people as "friends." This indicates that his aforementioned comment on the *signares'* attempts to dress like Parisian women has more to do with his attempt to remind his audience of the *signares'* distance from whiteness rather than an argument against *métis* aspirations to whiteness. The idea that the *signares* ought to continue to aspire to whiteness and Frenchness is articulated in the phrase "so that they could compare themselves to the most favored individuals of any origin in any country of the world." While his rhetoric is evidently intended to sound like a departure from France's history of treating Africans as second class individuals, Frey's use of the word "compare" clearly demonstrates his belief that the *signares* should aspire to whiteness and Frenchness while ultimately being unable to join the category of

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[129] Frey, *Côte occidentale de l'Afrique*, 15-17. Original text: "... la Signare se fait remarquer par un édifiant recueillement: ses anciens esclaves, les *Ouoloves*, qu'elle a converties à la foi chrétienne, l'y accompagnent et chantent des cantiques composés par les missionnaires… [Les signares] ont fourni une carrière honorable, pleine de dévouement, de bravoure, de probité, de manière à pouvoir se comparer aux individus les plus favorisés de n'importe quelle origine de tous les pays du monde…Loin de moi donc, je le répète, la pensée de jeter la défaveur ou la déconsidération sur les individus en particulier, d'autant que je compte parmi mes amis des mulâtres pour lesquels j'ai affection et estime…"

white Frenchness. The reduction of the *signares* to a singular, allegorical "Signare" highlights Frey's generalizations of these *métis* women and his adherence to French beliefs in racial, gendered, and ethnic inequalities under the guise of progressive rhetoric. However, Frey's approach to illustrating the *signares'* distance from white Frenchness in these sections is convoluted and difficult to follow without Verneuil's somewhat distant precedent in advocating for aspirations to whiteness and Frenchness. This ultimately indicates that the general French impression of *métis* women in Senegal was that they should aspire to rise above the inferior station associated with their race and gender, but that the rhetorics used emphasize this point in the latter half of the nineteenth century were contradictory and emblematic of the dissonances inherent to racist logics.

Figure 8. Signare et négresse de Saint-Louis en toilette.[130]

[130] Figure 8, Nousveaux, Edouard Auguste and Gustave Boulanger, "Signare et négresse de Saint-Louis en toilette," engraving, 1891, In *Trésors de l'iconographie du Sénégal colonial*, by Xavier Ricou, Figure C9, Paris: Riveneuve éditions, 2007.

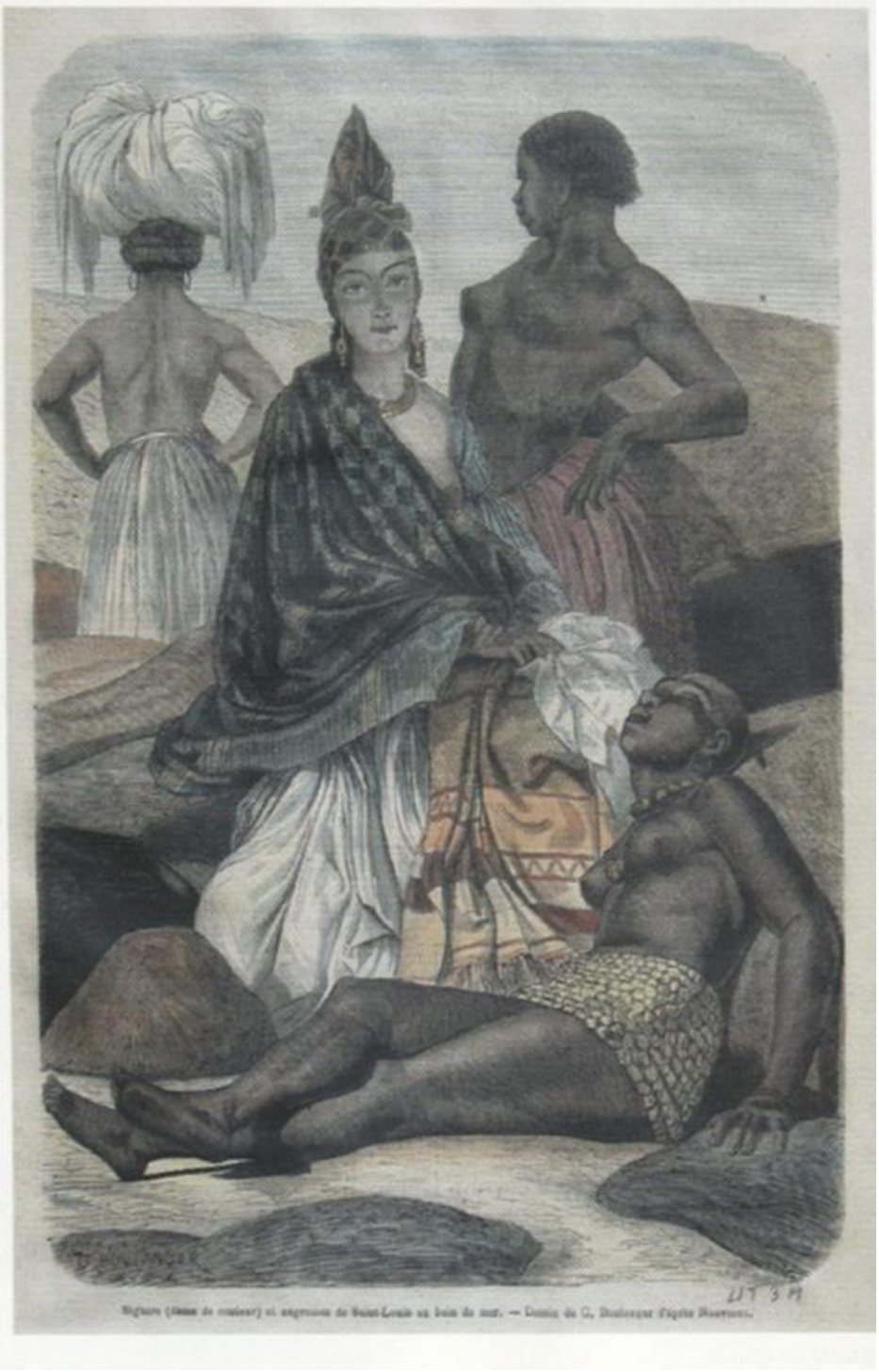

Figure 1. Signare (dame de couleur) et négresses de Saint-Louis au bain de mer.[131]

[131] Figure 1, Nousveaux, Edouard Auguste and Gustave Boulanger, "Signare (dame de couleur) et négresses de Saint-Louis au bain de mer," engraving, 1891, In *Trésors de l'iconographie du Sénégal colonial*, by Xavier Ricou, Figure C10, Paris: Riveneuve éditions, 2007.

Figures 8 and 1 are dated from 1891, just one year after Frey's book was published. They were first sketched by Édouard Auguste Nousveaux, then revised by Gustave Boulanger, and finally engraved by Adolphe François Pannemaker. The first two men were French and the third was Belgian, but all three were known for their artistic work in Paris. Figure 8, like Figure 6, was published in the French travel journal, *Le Tour du Monde*, by Edouard Charton in 1891; Figure 1 was created that same year, though there is little information on where it was published. As we have seen, Charton's travel journal published pieces in an ethnographic style, but considering its mission to garner French interest in distant places, Figure 8 must be analyzed with particular attention to exotic imagery. Nousveaux's original work on both Figures 8 and 1 is based on his own expedition to Senegal in the 1840s, but though there is evidence that Boulanger traveled to North Africa, there is little to suggest that he had been to Senegal.[132] Gustave Boulanger was famous for his "academic" artistic style, so although both pieces have a clearly ethnographic style, their rhetorical message must be handled carefully to dig beneath their strong artifices of objectivity.[133]

Figure 8 features a *signare* seated in the front right and a Black woman standing in the back left. Similarly to Figures 4 and 5, the *signare* wears a white dress with a swath of luxuriously patterned cloth draped from one shoulder across her torso and lap. The gathered details in her exposed sleeve indicate that her dress is an expensive European-style gown. Her headdress matches the patterned cloth across her chest, and its yellow hues highlight the gold jewelry in her ears and around her neck. In contrast, the Black woman beside her wears a baggy skirt and shirt, loosely shrouding her body in clashing stripe and flower patterns. A red necklace

[132] Ricou, *Trésors de l'iconographie*, 224.
[133] Firmin Javel, "Gustave Boulanger," L'art français: revue artistique hebdomadaire, 76 (1888): 108, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044034798710&view=page&seq=105&skin=2021.

and hooped earrings can barely be made out in the shadows across her face and neck, and her body leans backward into these shadows instead of attempting to escape them. Her bare feet are visible beneath the hem of her striped skirt, and her hands are hidden behind her back. Despite the obvious quality difference between their clothes, the most notable difference between the *signare* and the Black woman is their skin color. The *signare's* skin is bone white–so white, in fact, that her cheeks are devoid of any natural flush. Her coy gaze and affected smile are clearly visible against this ghostly background. In contrast, the Black woman to her right blends into the shadows conspicuously concentrated over her face and neck. While her eyes are still visible, her face's upward tilt and her dark skin in the shadows make it difficult to get a clear picture of her face. The light reflecting off of the *signare's* luminous skin creates ghoulish contours along the Black woman's chin, mouth, and the orbits of her eyes.

In contrast with Figures 4 and 5 from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Figure 8 clearly associates whiteness with wealth, elite class status, and centrality in this image while Blackness is associated with poverty, lower class status, and marginality. The *signare's* skin color alone introduces multiple additional issues. First, Black *signares* would have been rare if not nonexistent in the late-nineteenth century due to their long history of marrying European men, and it is therefore unlikely any of them would have had skin as white as Figure 8 suggests. This indicates that the whitening of the *signare's* skin served a distinct rhetorical purpose in French discourses on race in Senegal at the end of the nineteenth century. For one, the artists for these pieces could have imagined the *signares* to be lighter than they actually were due to French perceptions of the *signares* at the time. However, this explanation is unlikely because Nousveaux famously stayed in Gorée in 1844 and would have almost certainly encountered actual *signares*

during his stay there.[134] Furthermore, Frey's account from only one year prior very clearly describes the *signares* as "mulatto" and does not mention the bone-white skin depicted here. Another possible reason for the *signare's* improbably light skin could be that justifications for *signarial* marriages at this time required the *signares* to *appear* white. As the French civilizing mission increasingly discouraged *mariage à la mode du pays* throughout the nineteenth century, marriages between Black African women and white European men became increasingly untenable. By choosing to portray the *métis signares* with white skin, relations between white French men and African women of color would have been more palatable to a French audience that operated from a perspective of white supremacy.

Figure 1 portrays a similarly whitewashed *signare*, but this time with the suggestion of her left breast. There is no other known visual portrayal of the *signares* where their modesty is called into question using nudity, but here, despite her rich fabrics, erect headdress, and direct eye contact with the audience, a fraction of her breast is left exposed. The three other figures in this scene add to these sexual overtones. Three Black women with bare breasts lay or stand around the *signare* with their faces partially or completely hidden from view. While none of these women's eyes are open toward the audience, their muscles are painstakingly contoured and their bodies are contorted, seemingly to display their bodies more clearly to their (French) audience. Nousveaux and Boulanger's choice to accentuate the Black women's bodies over their faces not only places disproportionate rhetorical value on their bodies, but it robs them of the humanity communicated by complete faces. The *signare's* face, on the other hand, is strikingly visible against the white canvas of her skin, and her eyes are drawn in such detail that the audience can see the shading on her upper eyelids.

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[134] Ricou, *Trésors de l'iconographie*, 224. The signares definitely would not have been as light as the signares pictured in Figures 8 and 1 in 1844.

The Black women's partial nudity and the hint of the *signare's* left breast sexualize and exoticize these women. The limited sexualization of the whitewashed *signare* in comparison with the hypersexualization of the Black women reveals how Black womanhood was perceived to be more innately sexual than white womanhood in the French colonial consciousness at the end of the nineteenth century. The *signare* is separated from her Black female counterparts by her relative modesty, but although she appears white, she is separated from belonging to the class of white womanhood through the partial exposure of her breast. The *signare's* social liminality in Figure 8 points to a critical French narrative also found in Frey's book: the *signares* were considered superior to their Black female counterparts, but they could never be considered an equal members of white French society.

Unlike these two portraits from the end of the nineteenth century, early engravings indicate that class differences between the *métis signares* and Black women were not consistently racialized within the early French colonial consciousness. In Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7, the *signares* are clearly portrayed as part of a higher social class than Black women through their elaborate clothing and positioning. However, they share the same skin color with the Black women around them, thus attributing the class differences between these women to something outside of the frame. This provides us with a broad window, roughly from the late-eighteenth century through the 1860s, where class differences between the *métis signares* and Black women were not racialized consistently by the French. Marylee Crofts defined this as a "relaxed attitude" towards race, but based on these images and the turmoil in early nineteenth-century Senegal, early French perspectives on race can more accurately be understood as *flexible*.[135] Written sources help to more precisely track the racialization of class differences within the

[135] Crofts, "Economic Power and Racial Irony," 222. Flexible here meaning that these identities were negotiable.

French colonial consciousness, and they involve another key character who was physically distant from Senegal but ever-present within the minds of the French men who lived there: white French women. Villeneuve's book from 1814 emphasizes the *signares'* distance from white French women by subtly pointing to their proximity to Blackness and Africa through Wolof marital customs. His use of the word "limited" in describing *mariage à la mode du pays* exposes the belief that Wolof customs were inferior to French ones and that the *signares* thereby sprang from an inferior tradition and culture. The racialization of *signarial* superiority to Black women becomes clearer in the 1834 column from Haiti, where Blackness is associated with disorder, curiosity, and Islam, and the *signares* are associated with Catholicism, Christianizing Black women, and the elegance of a roman lady. This piece marks the *signares'* separation from Islam within the French colonial consciousness and the early days of their involvement in the French Catholic civilizing mission. These themes are elaborated in the 1841 feuilleton series—this time with a far more negative perspective on *signareship*. The *signares* are described as tyrannical, greedy, and idle due to their Blackness from "the first blood," but they are also encouraged to aspire to whiteness by abandoning *mariage à la mode du pays* in favor of *mariage à la française*. Whiteness is thus associated with moral and cultural progress while Blackness is linked to its opposite; for the *metis signares*, Blackness is framed as a pollutant or a degeneration of whiteness, and Africanness is similarly understood as a degeneration of Frenchness. *Signarial* aspirations to whiteness are encouraged throughout all three installments of the series, but the author's choice to end the story before Eglé's *mariage à la française* demonstrates that, in the French colonial consciousness, any woman possessing Black blood could never belong to the class of whiteness and Frenchness.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the idea that the *signares* should aspire to whiteness is reiterated in Verneuil and Frey's written accounts from 1858 and 1890 respectively. At the same time, the *signares* are increasingly portrayed as abandoned and laughable figures who, still clinging to the traditions that provided them social elevation in the first place, could never truly achieve white Frenchness. Arguments that the *métis signares* should aspire to whiteness initially seem to clash with French efforts to rhetorically block the signares from the white French class, and between different written and visual works, it can be difficult to determine a singular French perspective on the signares after 1841. However, these conflicting claims can be understood as a rhetorical and ideological tug of war, where French men in Senegal and the metropole were struggling to figure out how to situate the *signares* within the developing French colonial order. The French wrestled with their inability to view the *signares* as white on account of their proximity to Blackness and to treat the *signares* as Black on account of their proximity to whiteness; in Verneuil and Frey's work, this manifests as a sort of cognitive dissonance where the *signares* can be both laughable objects and "full of devotion, bravery, [and] integrity," aspire to whiteness without ever being permitted to identify as such, and spread French morality and religion without ever being allowed to be French.

As the rhetorics of racial difference grew in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the idea that the *signares* should serve as models for French Catholic morality emerged from the expansion of the Christian *mission civilisatrice*. In 1814, Villeneuve explains that women were considered to be the natural teachers for morality, and although this point is not articulated the same way in any other source in this chapter, Frey's particular attention to the *signares'* roles in Catholicizing Black women in their service and the persistent attacks on *mariage à la mode du pays* demonstrate that Villeneuve was not the only French man to connect womanhood with the

transmission of morality. These French artists and writers thought that as women connected to whiteness and France, the *signares* would be able to transmit white French morality to their Black African counterparts in urban coastal Senegal, but as women connected to Blackness and Africa, they would not be able to derive this morality on their own. In contrast with their struggles over the racialization of class, the French quickly determined that the *signares'* identities as women of color meant that before they could transmit the "right" morality—French Catholic morality—they would have to be educated by white French people themselves.

The formalization of French race and gender ideologies across the nineteenth century ultimately created a colonial hierarchy that placed white European men at the top and Black women (especially Black *slave* women) at the bottom. The French increasingly struggled to place the *signares* within the order, and due to their existential threat to French colonial hegemony, they are ultimately forced into a crystallized class below that of the white French elite.

Chapter Three: Locating Black Women in Nineteenth-Century Urban Coastal Senegal

If the *signares'* histories were severely damaged by the whitewashed and masculinized historical record, their Black female slaves' histories were nearly killed by it. Chapter Two demonstrated how surviving depictions of the *signares* by French men could be used to track the *signares'* movements within cultural and ideological landscapes across the nineteenth century. But what is to be done for Black slave women in their communities, who do not exist in such a wealth of primary materials? While the *signares'* voices cannot be directly heard, their histories are more easily accessible, with numerous named *signares* described in writing and pictured as central figures in colonial engravings and watercolors. In addition, numerous studies by scholars like Hilary Jones, George Brooks, and Martin Klein particularly focus on merchant women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thus privileging the *signares* in contemporary research as well. Black women from their communities are seldom, if ever, granted this same individual distinction. Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully claim: "...the closer we get to the defeated and lost, the more fragmentary the evidentiary record becomes."[136] Black slave women from nineteenth-century urban coastal Senegal survive in these fragments, pushed so far into the margins of history that, sometimes, it seems as if these women weren't even there.

This project strongly reaffirms that Black slave women were present in urban coastal Senegal throughout the nineteenth century, not just as a nameless, voiceless category of people, but as individuals who must have spoken—and whose voices have since been erased. This chapter does not claim to resurrect these individuals, nor does it claim to speak *for* them, as both of these endeavors would be problematic due to the colonial source material forming the basis

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[136] Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 5.

for this research. Claiming to speak *for* these women would moreover commit the discursive violence of substituting Black female voices with white male ones and pretending this is equivalent to hearing their voices directly. Instead, this chapter aims to locate Black women within the changing cultural and ideological landscapes established in the previous chapters. Because we are unable to draw upon many source materials particularly about Black women, this chapter targets Black women's relationships with the *signares* as the entry point for analysis. The *signares'* proximity to Black women in nineteenth-century urban coastal Senegal provides a unique window onto the latter's positions within the evolving French colonial project. The *signare* Anne Pépin from Gorée is speculated to have eaten from the same bowl and slept only rooms away from her young slave girl; still other slave girls helped their *signare* masters get dressed in the morning.[137] Although their experiences of French colonialism must have been different due to their divergent racial and class identities, Black women and the *signares'* cohabitation within white French male hegemony allows us to take their differential treatment in the same source materials as evidence for Black women's social and ideological locations at corresponding points throughout the nineteenth century.

Race, Gender, and the Civilizing Mission in Nineteenth-Century Senegal

Before we can search for Black slave women, we must first define the landscapes they occupied. Chapter One explained that French colonial agents were flexible in their initial approaches to race in order to survive and establish economic connections in Senegal. This flexible attitude towards race is evident through their marriages to the first generations of Black *signares.* Chapter Two demonstrated how this flexibility was bolstered by the lack of a formalized racial

[137] Hinchman, "House and Household on Gorée, Senegal, 1758-1837," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 169, 181.

project in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century urban coastal Senegal. At that stage, whiteness was generally seen as superior to Blackness, but the idea that Blackness was irredeemable had not yet reached colonial Senegal. The idea of Black irredeemability originated in the eighteenth century with the rise of polygenism, one of the core principles of scientific racism. Polygenism is the belief that human races did not share one common genetic ancestor, but rather originated from entirely distinct progenitors.[138] These distinct origins allowed for different fixed traits to be more easily attached to each racial group, like barbarism to Black people or civility to white people, and for these traits to be genetically repeated in perpetuity. Scientific racism developed alongside a diametrically opposed concept from the Enlightenment: the idea of a united human race. Emmanuelle Saada describes the result of the battle between these two perspectives in French thought: "The ideas of the unity of the human race, marked by the malleability of varieties and the possibility of improvement, persisted even after the natural scientists turned towards a more rigid conception of race at the beginning of the nineteenth century…"[139] While this malleability endures through the first two decades of the nineteenth century in the colonial Senegalese context, Chapter Two presents the first implicit example of racially assigned traits in René Claude Geoffroy de Villeneuve's book from 1814. Here, we see Blackness and Wolof culture associated with limits, and moreover, the need for civilization.[140] "[B]y the 1820s," Saada argues, "the belief in the unity of humanity had been largely displaced by a more rigid conception of race… Civilization was no longer a cause of observable differences between human groups; it became a consequence of race."[141] In Senegal, however,

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[138] Emmanuelle Saada, "Race and Empire in Nineteenth-Century France," in *The Cambridge History of French Thought,* ed. Michael Moriarty and Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 355.
[139] Saada, "Race and Empire in Nineteenth-Century France," 354-355.
[140] See Chapter Two under the first body section.
[141] Saada, "Race and Empire in Nineteenth-Century France," 355.

the implementation of the Catholic civilizing mission in 1817 indicates that at least initially, religion was seen as a possible means of redemption for alleged racial degeneracy. Thus, there was a delay in scientific racism's influence on racialized thinking in urban coastal Senegal. In the 1834 newspaper column from Haiti, for example, the *signares'* affiliation with Catholicism rewards them with a comparison to "roman ladies," while Black people's association with Islam and fetishism links them to disorder and curiosity. By the time the "Une Signare" feuilleton series was published in 1841, however, French writers had begun to explicitly conceptualize Blackness, even as it existed in *métissage*, as a genetic condition correlated to laziness, jealousy, and greed.[142] "Blacks," Robin Mitchell summarizes, "could not and should not be a part of the French body politic… blacks were not included in the definition of Frenchness."[143] Regardless of one's connections to whiteness or Catholicism, Blackness "from the first blood" indicated irredeemable corruption.[144]

If the original French mission in Senegal had been founded on the will to profit and the will to proselytize, the military expansion into interior kingdoms like Cayor in the 1850s exemplifies the French will to power that defined life in urban coastal Senegal in the latter half of the nineteenth century.[145] Until the 1840s, the Christian civilizing mission meant that through the *signares'* conversion and devotion to Catholicism, they could redeem themselves of their connections to Africa and Blackness. This appeared to mean that the *signares* themselves could join the elite class of white Frenchness. After the 1840s, however, religious redemption could no longer separate the *signares* from their genetic connections to Blackness and Africa, thus

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[142] See the section on the "Une Signare" series in Chapter Two.
[143] Robin Mitchell et al., *Vénus Noire: Black women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France,* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2020), 21.
[144] See the original use of this quote in the "Une Signare" section in Chapter Two.
[145] The phrase "will to power" comes from Abena Busia's employment of the Nietzchean "will to…" construction from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

permanently excluding them from the category of whiteness and Frenchness. To add salt to injury, when France extended voting rights to urban coastal Senegal in 1848, the *signares'* womanhood "would be used to undercut [their] power and influence… women remained legally 'passive' citizens, denied any 'active' rights, while universal suffrage was extended to men."[146] While the womanhood was a more socially flexible identity at the beginning of the nineteenth century in urban coastal Senegal, by the mid-century, it became one of the identities used to separate them from the white French elite class. White French colonial domination after the abolition of slavery necessitated total control over the racial and gendered order in places like Saint Louis and Gorée, and to this end, the *signares* could not be permitted to belong to the same class as white French men. The *signares* had lost their positions in trade and much of their social status by the end of the nineteenth century. However, after the 1820s, religious redemption and their proximity to whiteness *did* mean that the *signares* remained in a social class above Black slave and freed women. But how were Black slave women affected by these ideological changes? Where did they fit within the evolving French colonial order?

On the Erasure of Black Slave Women

In the most general sense, we know that prior to 1848, Black women who were not married to European men existed in one of two primary categories: free or enslaved. In theory, the period after abolition should have represented the transformation of the two free and enslaved categories into one category of free Black women, but we also know that systems of unfreedom did not disappear after the formal abolition of slavery in 1848.[147] However, historians often

[146] Lorelle Semley, *To Be Free and French: Citizenship in France's Atlantic Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 73.
[147] Claire Robertson, "We Must Overcome: Genealogy and Evolution of Female Slavery in West Africa," *Journal of West African History* 1, no. 1 (2015), 75.

generalize these claims and have yet to delve deep enough into understanding how the changing ideological landscape particularly in Senegal affected the persistence of systems of unfreedom for Black slave women in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It is one of the greatest tragedies of the historical record on colonial Senegal that Black slave women have been robbed of specificity in primary documentation, but to call these women "lost" or "defeated" closes us off from the possibility of researching them in the first place. Abena Busia describes this as the "double silencing of the African woman—her presumed silence and the acceptance of her silencing... a silence which is a fiction having consequences beyond the fiction itself."[148] The original silencing of Black slave women by white male colonial agents is thus perpetuated in contemporary discourse through the use of the lexical field of loss, defeat, and even silence. Even more, the comparative wealth of primary source materials on the *signares* has led to less attention on enslaved and poorly represented Black women in the contemporary historiography. But French colonial agents' "systematic refusal to hear [Black female] speech is not the same thing as [their] silence," and we should not take either to mean that these women were defeated or lost to history.[149] In accepting Black slave women's silence as it is presented to us by the colonial archive, we, too, are systematically refusing to hear or look for them. This project consequently turns to a different rhetorical lens that opens up the doors for historical inquiry: erasure.

"Erasure," in this context, manifests in multiple ways. The first is the most evident: the erasure of Black slave women's voices from histories on Senegal. The *signares* were also victims of this type of erasure due to their identities as women of color. Elaborating on Busia's

[148] Busia, "Silencing Sycorax," 99.
[149] Busia, "Silencing Sycorax," 103.

discussion of double-silencing, Marisa Fuentes describes this as the process of receiving colonial documents as they were written: "Enslaved women appear as historical subjects through the form and content of archival documents in the manner in which they lived… violence is transferred from the enslaved bodies to… documents… and we receive them in this condition."[150] In this way, the silence inscribed in the historical record by colonial agents is received as the *actual* condition of Black slave women, thus committing not only double-silencing but *double-erasure*. The rhetoric of erasure is critical here because it reminds us that silence was imposed on Black women rather than it being their natural state. "Erasure" points us toward the colonial intentions behind the silencing of Black women and allows us to conceptualize it as a fictional creation of French colonial ideology. "And in this context," Busia writes, "imperial and colonial fictions serve as but one goose-step march within the choreographies of hegemonic power."[151]

The latter two manifestations of erasure are more difficult to identify, but are no less important: the erasure of Black female slave individuality, and the erasure of Black female slave humanity. Abdul JanMohamed elucidates the function of erasing individuality in erasing humanity in general terms: "The European writer commodifies the native by negating his individuality, his subjectivity, so that he is now perceived as a generic being that can be exchanged for any other native."[152] While JanMohamed inappropriately treats men as the blueprint for indigenous groups, he explains that the generalization of vastly diverse peoples allows indigenous groups to be more easily commodified. Could this also make the oppression of Black slave women after formal abolition easier in Senegal? After the French will to profit and

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[150] Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 5.
[151] Busia, "Silencing Sycorax," 101.
[152] Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985), 64.

proselytize fed into a great will to power, did the erasure of freed Black female individuality aid in their continued oppression and relegation to unfree corners of society?

Black Slave Women: Unfreedoms Across Abolition

The first step in answering these questions is to define female slave labor in Senegal. This information is the most thoroughly researched aspect of Black womanhood in West Africa because while colonial agents did not describe Black women as people with families, aspirations, and histories, they *did* document their labor because it served the French will to profit. Slavery had existed in West Africa long before the French first settled in Senegal in the fifteenth century. In contrast with the chattel slavery model used in North America and elsewhere in West Africa, Africans in Senegal primarily practiced small-scale lineage slavery in the precolonial era.[153] Lineage slavery, also known as assimilative slavery, was not necessarily less severe than chattel slavery, but it did yield greater possibilities for slaves' social mobility: "[It] has the long-term goal of creating a larger free population when those who were enslaved forcibly, by violence, societal customs, or judicial means… became free and/or their children were free[d]."[154] Because the end goal of this model was not to expand the slave class, it might have been more possible for free Black people to coexist with slaves. This can be seen from women occupying numerous levels of West African society, not only as slaves but as the free "primary users, supervisors, and/or owners of female slaves."[155] The masculinization of African history has, until recently, described exclusively male slave owners, but this is a misapplication of European patriarchal ideals on African models for slavery, leading to the additional misconception that men were the

[153] Robertson, "We Must Overcome," 75.
[154] Ibid., 62.
[155] Ibid., 66.

primary laborers in agriculture and crafting. "However," Martin Klein and Claire Robertson write, "there is no reason to suspect that in precolonial times women did not perform most of the agricultural work. The sexual division of labor [in fact] often dictated that women perform the more labor-intensive tasks, not only in agriculture but in craft work."[156] In more recent literature, most scholars have come to agree that low-status menial labor was seen as women's work in West Africa, and men's engagement in any such labor was masculine participation in typically feminine labor.[157] Women were particularly attractive as slaves compared to men because of their vulnerability to enslavement and their dual-productivity: their productive manual labor and their *re*productive sexual labor. However, Klein and Robertson argue, "the analysis of the status of slave women suffers from an overweening emphasis on the so-called biological functions of reproduction."[158] This is not to say that female slaves' reproductive capacities were unimportant to their predominance in precolonial menial labor; it is rather to point out that their involvement in commodity production and household work was a more *dependable* source of labor than their sexual reproduction of the slave workforce.

The high African demand for female slaves meant that most slaves in precolonial Senegal were women, and this remained true through the nineteenth century. James Searing explains this dynamic in Saint Louis: "Most slave owners, large and small, owned men and women with a variety of skills, although women tended to predominate."[159] Lorelle Semley comments on the same dynamic in Gorée, where she claims that the majority of the whole island's population was enslaved women and girls.[160] Under French rule, Black women and girls often served as

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[156] Martin Klein and Claire Robertson, "Women's Importance in African Slave Systems" in *Women and Slavery in Africa*, ed. Martin Klein and Claire Robertson (Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann: 1997), 9.
[157] Robertson, "We Must Overcome," 68.
[158] Klein and Robertson, "Women's Importance in African Slave Systems," 8.
[159] Searing, *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce*, 180.
[160] Semley, *To Be Free and French*, 74.

laundresses, *pileuses* (grain pounders), household workers, and sometimes concubines. Their household labor included cleaning, cooking, gardening, and tending to children and the sick. However, especially in the signares' services, sometimes this labor included more performative tasks: "Sometimes these [Black female] slaves occupied themselves by picking up the stones and thorns that could hurt [the signares'] petite feet…"[161] Though slave women typically had no rights to their own children, colonial society at the beginning of the nineteenth century was malleable enough that some slave women were able to buy their own freedom and acquire their own slaves.[162] Despite the more robust schooling put in place by the Sisters of Saint-Joseph de Cluny for the *signares*, girl slaves' education was far more informal "since most were employed as domestic workers..."[163] Opportunities to purchase one's freedom and to obtain a more formal education could have been influenced by a female slave's religious status. Saint Louis and Gorée differed in their typical religious treatment of slaves: in Saint Louis, the majority of slaves and former captives practiced Islam, but in Gorée, slaves were usually baptized as Christians.[164] It is possible that the Christianized slaves on Gorée, especially the female slaves who attended mass with the *signares*, had privileges afforded only to Catholics like rudimentary instruction in the French language. However, as of yet, there has been very little research into differences in religious treatment between slaves in Saint Louis and Gorée.

On top of the long history of women's predominance in West African slavery, a census from Gorée in 1847 provides another harrowing insight into Black female slavery in colonial Senegal: "...there was an important excess of girls in the population of slave children under

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[161] De Villeneuve, *Le Sénégal*, 89. "Quelquefois ces escalves [négresses] portent l'attention jusqu'à ramasser les pierres et les épines qui pourroient blesser les pieds mignons [des signares]…"
[162] Jones, *The Métis of Senegal*, 49.
[163] Searing, *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce*, 179.
[164] Jones, *The Métis of Senegal*, 50.

fourteen years of age (671 girls and 574 boys). The simplest explanation is a clandestine trade in young girls."[165] This trade was able to function presumably because small girls were easiest to smuggle onto the islands undetected, but perhaps more disturbingly, because their identities as young, Black girls rendered them invisible to the French colonial regime.[166] Who amongst the white men in power would listen to the cries of a young Black girl? And within a colonial regime that only valued Black women and girls for their labor, why would the French try to stop it?[167]

The abolition of slavery in 1848 did nothing to disrupt this clandestine trade in young girls, nor did it demonstrably change Black slave women's labor or their state of unfreedom. Estimates of the enslaved population in urban coastal Senegal that same year indicate that there were between 10,075 and 10,196 slaves in Saint Louis and Gorée alone.[168] Of that number, approximately 40 percent of the slaves liberated between 1868 and 1888 were minors and about 70 percent were female, though in reality, these statistics could be much higher considering it was data published in only one paper, *Le Moniteur du Sénégal*.[169] But what were the terms of this liberation for Black women and girls? For young girls, abolition meant their conversion from slaves to wards of the colonial state. This conversion was initially overseen by the *comité de patronage*, or a committee specifically designed to arrange and monitor young girls' apprenticeships to *signares*, colonial officials, and the Catholic Church. *Signares* were initially asked to direct this committee considering their preexisting connection to young slave girls.

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[165] Searing, *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce*, 182.

[166] Ibid., 182.

[167] "Labor" here refers to productive and sexual labor, but primarily productive labor because, as is established elsewhere in this chapter, production was a more stable source of labor than reproduction.

[168] Bernard Moitt, "Slavery and Guardianship in Postemancipation Senegal: Colonial Legislation and Minors in Tutelle, 1848-1905," in *Child Slaves in the Modern World*, ed. Gwyn Campbell et al, (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011), 130.

[169] Moitt, "Slavery and Guardianship in Postemancipation Senegal," 130. *Le Moniteur de Sénégal* was the official paper of the French colonial government in Senegal.

However, *signares* like Marie Labouré and Virginie Legros protested adopting young girls as apprentices and resigned from their directorships, claiming that it was "an insult to and degradation of [the *signares'*] social standing."[170] This is a critical instance of *signares* resisting French demands and pushing for the reification of the slave class in order to protect their own status. In 1849, this resistance led to the nominal transfer of guardianship over girls to the *conseils de tutelle* which also oversaw young boys' apprenticeships. Louis Faidherbe, the governor of Senegal between 1854-61 and 1863-65, revised this wardship program in 1855, requiring that any slave children still being purchased at river posts must be freed and registered with the *tutelle* committee upon their arrival in Saint Louis.[171] The Acts of 1857 and 1862 also aimed to tighten regulations on child guardianships under Faidherbe's leadership, but the lack of continued checks on this system meant that the *conseil de tutelle* "existed in name only," leaving adopted minors with nominal legal protections that were seldom enforced.[172] Despite their legal designations as free people, the French administration's failure to enforce any of the nominal protections for these children "frequently left adopted minors in precious positions that resembled slavery."[173]

Formerly enslaved women faced a similar fate of nominal, but not practical, liberation from slavery in 1848. Perhaps the most glaring example of this nominal liberation came with the *patents de liberté,* or legal certificates of freedom. Until the mid-1880s, droves of slaves from the interior of the continent were brought to Saint Louis and Gorée to work as *pileuses*, laundresses, kitchen women, and domestic servants. On the one hand, slaves could apply for *patents de*

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[170] Ibid., 130. This is a more specific example of the signares' resistance to abolition mentioned in Chapter One.
[171] Jones, *The Métis of Senegal*, 59.
[172] Moitt, "Slavery and Guardianship in Postemancipation Senegal," 131-132. Moitt also notes that the lack of continued checks on child guardianship were partially due to the lack of financial and judicial resources to enforce checks
[173] Ibid., 127.

liberté as individuals, and many of the slaves who came or were brought to urban coastal Senegal did so; on the other, the French colonial officers and households who hired them needed to find a way to legitimate these laborers in the new, free French Republic.[174] *Patents de liberté* provided the French with the necessary tangible excuse to continue employing predominantly female African laborers in the same capacities as they had prior to abolition. Trevor Getz summarizes: "The culture of slavery in St. Louis and Gorée continued as much the same arrangement under a different name, since a small elite still dominated both housing and employment, and many new slaves were simply integrated into the local economy…"[175] This type of liberation can thus be more accurately understood as *performative* liberation, where symbols for freedom like the *patents de liberté* could be referenced as evidence of the French Empire's moral progress while Black women and young girls continued to be trapped in cycles of unfreedom that fed the France's need for cheap labor.

More generally, because female ex-slaves were typically trained in menial labor, African women were oftentimes not qualified to work in the wage labor market, thus finding themselves limited to the same types of labor they had been forced to complete as slaves. Thus, despite multiple rounds of legislative protections for young girls and legal certificates of freedom for women, the ostensibly monumental step forward of abolition was not really an effective step forward at all. Across 1848, Black African women and girls were confined to the same unfree labor pounding grain, making food, and taking care of French people's homes and children. The continuous assimilation of female slaves from the interior of the continent contributed to the disproportionately large number of slave women and girls in Gorée and Saint Louis in both

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[174] Trevor Getz, *Slavery and Reform in West Africa: Toward Emancipation in Nineteenth Century Senegal and the Gold Coast*, (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004), 150.
[175] Getz, *Slavery and Reform in West Africa*, 156-157.

halves of the nineteenth century. But Black enslaved women must not be located solely through their labor. Frenchmen viewed these women solely as vessels for productivity, and this perspective is inscribed both in the written texts of history and in its silences. It is paramount that we do not receive them solely in this way.

Locating Black Slave Women through their Relationships with the Signares

In this final section, a new entry point to Black women's histories in urban coastal Senegal will be used: Black women's *relationships* with the *signares*. While depictions of Black women alone do exist, these images tend to be generalized portraits of women from the interior of the continent, and they do not tell us much outside of the menial labor they engaged in or their general exoticization by French artists. In an effort to understand more about Black women in urban coastal Senegal outside of their labor, we can track Black women's portrayals alongside the *signares'* to better understand how changing French perspectives on race, gender, and class could have affected these women's societal positions across the nineteenth century. Many of the primary sources considered in Chapter Two are particularly useful in this endeavor.

Figure 4. [176]

Figure 5. [177]

Figures 4 and 5, pictured again above, provide insights from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Black slave women are depicted following the *signares* and holding parasols above their heads, emphasizing their servile class position in comparison with the elite *signares*. Another important element of this class difference is articulated through the partial nudity of all three of the slave women. Ayo Coly reminds us not to accept these portrayals solely

[176] Figure 4, de Saint-Sauveur, "Négresses de qualité de l'Isle St-Louis dans le Sénégal, accompagné de son esclave," engraving, late eighteenth-century, In *Trésors de l'iconographie du Sénégal colonial*, by Xavier Ricou, Figure C1, Paris: Riveneuve éditions, 2007.

[177] Figure 5, "1. Négresse esclave. 2. Signare de l'Isle St. Louis. 3. Marabou ou Prêtre du Pays. 4. Nègre armé en guerre. 5. Négresse esclave portant son enfant," engraving, 1801, In *Trésors de l'iconographie du Sénégal colonial*, by Xavier Ricou, Figure C3, Paris: Riveneuve éditions, 2007.

as historical evidence, but also as a "colonial gesture and discursive production," where nudity becomes the "inscription of sexual deviance on the [B]lack female body..."[178] Nudity, or the "seminal gesture of unclothing the female body[,] made possible the subsequent gesture of clothing, both colonial gestures seizing the African female body to denote Africa's proximity to civilisation, morality and normalcy."[179] However, as was established in Chapter Two, these two images do not correlate race or gender with the class differences between the *signares* and Black slave women, thus creating the impression of social and class fluidity for women of color in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This fluidity corroborates Hinchman and Robertson's findings on the coexistence of free Black women and female slaves in the precolonial and early colonial eras, but it complicates Coly's contention that the nudity inscribed in Figures 4 and 5 demanded the colonial gesture of clothing Black female bodies. How could this nudity call for a civilizing mission before that mission had fully formed within the French consciousness? This suggests that before the formalization of French perspectives on race, nudity was more generally used to represent the alleged incivility and immorality of Black *slave* women, not Black women as an entire racial category.

The 2:1 ratio of slave women to slave men in Figure 4 emphasizes the relative prevalence of female slaves to male ones (especially in the *signares'* entourages) and suggest that Black slave women were disproportionately represented in urban coastal labor.[180] The imagery of the baby toddling in front of the slave woman in Figure 4 and of the slave woman holding a baby on her back in Figure 5 also draws the connection between Black slave women, childcare, and their

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[178] Ayo Coly, "Un/clothing African Womanhood: Colonial Statements and Postcolonial Discourses of the African Female Body," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 33, no. 1 (2016): 13-14.
[179] Coly, "Un/clothing African Womanhood," 14.
[180] This corroborates Klein, Robertson, Getz, Moitt, Jones, and Semley's claims that female slaves vastly outnumbered male ones.

reproductive labor. Chapters One and Two found that the French had a more flexible approach to race at the beginning of the nineteenth century; in accordance with these findings, Black slave women's class positions are pictured here as lower than the *signares',* but due to these women's mutual possession of Blackness and womanhood, slave women's class is understood as more negotiable than fixed.

Figure 9. Intérieur d'une case de signare à Gorée.[181]

Figure 9 was not included in Chapter Two, but it presents an important perspective on Black slave women from the early 1840s. Designed and engraved by an unknown artist, this piece was published only one time in an 1841 book titled *Campagne de circumnavigation de l'Artémise pendant les années 1837-1840.*[182] Xavier Ricou describes the style of this image as "quasi

[181] Figure 9, unknown artist, "Intérieur d'une case de signare à Gorée," engraving, 1841, In *Trésors de l'iconographie du Sénégal colonial*, by Xavier Ricou, Figure C15, Paris: Riveneuve éditions, 2007.
[182] The author of the book where this engraving was published is Cyrille Pierre Théodore Laplace.

ethnographic," reminding us that although this image appears to portray real figures, we are engaging directly with the artifice of objectivity.[183] Six partially nude slave women sit on the ground sifting through grain, caring for children, and standing in line near the entrance of the *case en dur*. Once again, Black slave women are associated with their reproductive labor through the presence of children, and they are linked to menial labor through their grain sifting. The women standing in line carry large bowls or children on their backs and judging from their single file stance and their empty containers, they are waiting for the next round of sifted grain from the women working on the floor. The *signare* sits on a raised bed, clothed in a modest dress, and illuminated by an open window behind her. The light reveals her face to the audience, and her outstretched arms draw attention to the single strand of cotton she is spinning between her hands. This line of cotton is a reminder that the *signares*, too, as free women of color, engaged in menial labor alongside their slaves. While the *signare's* face is revealed by a soft light, the slave women's faces are partially or entirely obscured by darkness. This could be in part due to the quality or age of the engraving, but it could also be due to the artist's lack of attention to the women's faces. The latter explanation would support JanMohamed's claims about negating indigenous figures' individuality and subjectivity. By obscuring these women's faces, the designer and engraver for this image could have, intentionally or otherwise, represented Black slave women in their most generic form from the French colonial perspective: partially nude, dark figures whose only role was to work. These women are physically projected as dark voids which are taken to represent a blank psychic interior. It is critical to note that these representations of Black slave women are projections of what the French colonial consciousness *believed* about Black African womanhood. As in our analyses of the *signares*, the French

[183] Ricou, *Trésors de l'iconographie du Sénégal colonial*, 66.

representation of a Black African woman should not be taken as unequivocal truth, but rather as a reflection of the French belief in Black slave women's lack of individuality—and thus, their lack of humanity.

As in Figures 4 and 5, Figure 9 asserts a class distinction between the *signare* and the Black slave women through their clothing. However, Figure 9 introduces two new modes of class distinction: differences in physical elevation and the revelation of complete faces. The *signare's* elite status is demonstrated through her slight but distinct elevation atop her bed, her modest clothing, and her complete face; slave women's low class status is projected through their positions on the floor and toward the margins of the room, their bare breasts, and their incomplete faces. Perhaps most importantly, these markers for class difference are associated with explicit racial difference, with Blackness here connoting subservience to the lighter-skinned *signare.* Whereas Figures 4 and 5 portray the *signare* engaging quite literally on the same level as Black slave women, Figure 9 begins to more explicitly separate these women on account of their racial differences. Chapter Two explained that, by 1841, French perspectives towards race, gender, and class were beginning to solidify as part of a formalized colonial effort. While the French wrestled with how to understand the *signares*' relationships with Blackness, the *signares* were still celebrated in colonial society for their connections to whiteness. Figure 9 adds to this conversation with its ample inclusion of Black slave women, and in comparison with their *signarial* counterpart, their more distinct belonging to a lower class indicates that the *signares* weren't just settling into a more stable class position above Black slave women—slave women were being forced further down in the ranks.

Figure 7. Cour intérieure d'une maison de Gorée.

Figure 7 (1867) from Chapter Two somewhat complicates this narrative. Ex-slave women continue to be associated with menial labor like grain pounding and laundry washing, and the small child wrapped up on the left side of the image reminds the viewer of freed Black women's reproductive capacities and their roles in childcare. Compared to the finely dressed *signares* on the balcony, at least two of the five women in the courtyard have exposed breasts—one of whom is highlighted by the patch of sunlight on the courtyard floor. The elevation difference seen in the last image is exacerbated here, with the *signares* watching the freed Black women work from the balcony of their *case en dur*. In contrast with Figure 9, the *signares* in this image are not engaged in any menial labor and in fact are so physically distant from the freed women's labor on the

courtyard floor that if one did not have the context of Figure 9 before this, no association between the *signares* and menial labor would be assumed at all. While this image's publication came almost twenty years after the abolition of slavery, the class distance between freed Black women and the *signares* seems greater than ever. However, the absence of clear racial difference between the *signares* and the freed Black women seems to disrupt the narrative of increasingly racialized class differences drawn between Figures 4, 5, and 9. On the one hand, this could indicate that the racialization of class in urban coastal Senegal had not yet settled, and approaches to demonstrating difference sometimes depended more on clothing, light and shadow, physical location, and symbols like the barnyard animals on the courtyard floor. Chapter Two adds to this explanation, claiming that in efforts to tie the *signares* more closely with Africa, the artists behind Figure 7 didn't want to overemphasize their detachment from the freed women in the courtyard. Neither of these explanations is mutually exclusive, and in any event, the articulations of class difference in this image are less explicitly tied to race than in Figure 9. The lack of extreme differences between the *signares* and the freed Black women's complexions does not dismiss a crucial earlier point: the class divide between the *signares* and formerly enslaved Black women *increased* after abolition.

However, this class divide is buried in Black women and girls' stagnant positionality within *signarial* households. In 1890, Colonel Frey described the *signares* as "cherish[ing]" young Black girls in their homes "like [sisters]," but considering increasing French biases against women and girls of color in urban coastal Senegal, it is unlikely that this was truly the case. [184] More likely, as Claire Robertson and Martin Klein's research affirms from a more general perspective, these girls were the products of wardship programs which essentially allowed the

[184] "… la jeune négresse, dont elle a fait sa confidente, et qu'elle chérit à l'égale d'une soeur." Frey, *Côte occidentale d'Afrique*, 15.

signares to "adopt" them as domestic laborers. As the next engraving demonstrates, Black women also continued to be portrayed in the same physical positions vis-à-vis the *signares* in visual documents.

Figure 8. Signare et négresse de Saint-Louis en toilette.

Figure 8 (1891) from Chapter Two returns to the close-up, ethnographic portrait style used in Figure 4, but this time at the end of the nineteenth century. Although the elevation

difference evident in Figures 9 and 7 has been abandoned in this work, freed Black women's lower-class status is still articulated, and this time with a clear connection between class and racial difference. Figures 4 and 8 both demonstrate class difference between the *signare* and the Black woman using their clothing and the situation of the Black woman behind the *signare*, but more subtle evidence of difference exists, quite literally, in the shadows. In a diagonal line from the lower left corner to the upper right, darkness is separated from lightness, with the Black woman standing in the shadows and the *signare* calmly basking in her own luminescence. The Black woman's face turned upward and away from the light on her lower body creates the impression of her actively leaning backward into darkness. This leaning motion could have been used simply to illustrate the Black woman's clear connection to darkness, but it also might be intended to indicate the belief that freed Black women chose to gravitate towards darkness, Blackness, and Africanness as opposed to the lightness, whiteness, and partial Frenchness embodied by the *signare*. While Blackness is depicted as a negotiable social category in Figures 4 and 5, it is transformed in this image into a fixed category that is both innate and a choice. Similarly to Figure 9, this image does not provide us with a clear picture of the Black woman's face, while the *signare's* face is starkly visible against her impossibly light skin. Thus, while Figures 4 and 5 seem to emphasize freed Black women and the *signare's* cohabitation of their environment, Figure 8 emphasizes their metaphysical separation despite their co-occupation of the same physical space. This stark establishment of difference is surprising over forty years after the abolition of slavery, when all women of color should have theoretically shared the same class status. This leaves us with one critical question: did the abolition of slavery really leave freed Black women in the same positions they had occupied prior to 1848?

Freed Black Women: Unfree After Abolition

Scholars like James Searing, Trevor Getz, and Claire Robertson contend that the abolition of slavery did not mean the liberation of Black slave women, and these images confirm this point in the case of nineteenth-century urban coastal Senegal. Just considering the physical locations of the Black slave women depicted in Figures 4 and 5 in comparison with the Black woman shown in Figure 10, we can see that these women share the exact same positions almost one hundred years apart. Across the nineteenth century, enslaved and freed Black women are illustrated pounding grain, washing laundry, caring for children, and attending to the *signares*. Without the prior knowledge of abolition in 1848, it would be impossible to know that Black women in portraits from the latter half of the nineteenth century enjoyed a completely different legal status from the women portrayed in the first half of the century. But something did change for formerly enslaved Black women after abolition: their positions within the French colonial imaginary. Searing, Getz, and Robertson's emphases on continuity across the inflection point of abolition neglect to acknowledge how freed Black women might have been affected by the formalization of French ideas about race. In emphasizing the stagnance of enslaved-then-freed Black women's labor across abolition, they assume that their class positions remain the same and unknowingly project the idea of Black slave women frozen in place onto colonial history. However, the racialization of class in urban coastal Senegal did not just solidify the *signares'* class below the French—it also forced freed Black women further into the bottom rank of colonial society. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, we see Black enslaved women and Black *signares* interacting within the same sphere. By the end, although the *signares* and freed Black women still occupy the same physical spaces in the images, elevation, lighting, and explicit racial differences emphasize the metaphysical distance between them.

The combination of legal freedom with the racialization of class in urban coastal Senegal suggests that a more rigid landscape of unfreedom existed after the abolition of slavery than prior to it. This is not to suggest that the legal designation of freedom was unimportant, but rather to point out that legal freedoms, when not actively supported by the governments that create it, can serve to cover up illegal unfreedoms. Moreover, the visible continuity of labor can hide intangible, but no less important, changes in ideology that have long term implications in how society is organized and how members of that society are treated. Black slave women paradoxically had more freedom to move outside of the bottom class prior to abolition; after 1848, as the images above have demonstrated, we see a more forceful articulation of freed Black women's belonging to the lowest possible class in colonial urban coastal Senegal. Klein and Robertson broadly define slavery as a condition in which a person is "unvoluntarily servile, has a marginal position within her social unit, and [is] subject to the control of another."[185] Freed Black women undeniably experienced a form of slavery after abolition in 1848 due to government oversight and the continued French need for cheap labor, but their relegation to an increasingly stable bottom class in urban coastal Senegal allowed this enslavement to continue by other names into the twentieth century.

[185] Klein and Robertson, "Women's Importance in African Slave Systems," 3.

Conclusion

Figure 1 was published almost seventy years after the first Catholic missionaries were sent to Saint Louis. In the decades that transpired between their arrival and this engraving's release to the French public, the establishment of "free trade" in Senegal limited trading rights to French men, slavery was abolished and yet maintained by new names, and the French violently expanded into Senegal's interior while they preached a doctrine of Catholic morality. The nineteenth century in urban coastal Senegal was thus defined by its many contradictions—including the *signares* themselves. The *signare* in Figure 1 embodies the contradictory ways the *signares* were understood within the French colonial imagination: white but not white, modest but not modest, civilized but uncivilized. By the end of the nineteenth century, the *signares'* very existence within the French colonial order challenged the race, gender, and class binaries the French had developed to rule its empire.

What the French understood as a contradiction and existential threat to white male French hegemony was really just *métissage* and womanhood in power. As traders, slave owners, and social elites, the *signares* had accumulated enough wealth and status that they, too, felt they had rights akin to those of white French people. This is exemplified by Virginie Legros and Marie Labouré's refusal to aid in the wardship program because they felt it diminished their former status as slave owners.[186] Even more, their refusal demonstrates how the *signares* themselves became increasingly aware of French efforts to undermine their power—and how they fought to resist. The *signares'* systematic removal from positions of meaningful power in Saint Louis and Gorée presents us with key stages in the formalization of the French colonial agenda: the elimination of illicit trade in 1817, the implementation of the Catholic civilizing mission, the

[186] See Chapter Three under "Black Slave Women: Unfreedoms Across Abolition."

reorganization of trade around French and *métis* male leaders, and finally, the abolition of slavery in 1848. The military conquests into the interior of Senegal in the 1850s were explicit and violent manifestations of a colonial project that had been formalizing for over thirty years in the economic and social spheres.

French representations of the *signares*, like Figure 1 shown in the introduction and Chapter Two, expose how female *métissage* created cognitive dissonance within the French colonial consciousness. Conflicting portrayals of race in engravings from the latter half of the nineteenth century demonstrate how the French wrestled with identities that did not fit easily into the white/Black and female/male binaries. Frey's report of the *signares* as simultaneously "honorable" and a "laughingstock" in 1890 adds to the idea that the French continued to agonize over understanding the *signares'* positions within a society that was meant to be divided into four classes with white men at the top and Black women at the bottom. Tracking written and engraved portraits of the *signares* across the nineteenth century reveals how French ideologies about race and gender crystallized to order the colony in ways that made it easier to understand and control. This process of crystallization was not linear, nor was it rapid, but by the time Figure 1 was published for a French audience in Paris, the *signares* had already been confined to a new social class permanently external to white Frenchness.

This new social class also secured the *signares'* class position above freed Black women. This is exemplified in Figure 1 through the hypersexualization of the three Black women and the *signare's* relative modesty and luxury. The *signares'* proximity to Black slave and freed women across the nineteenth century allows us to also see where the latter were located across each of the events highlighted in Chapter One. A comparison of Figures 4 and 1 demonstrates that even after Black slave women were freed in 1848, their physical distance from the *signares* did not

change at all within the French colonial imagination. Scholars like Claire Robertson, Trevor Getz, and James Searing have aptly described this as freed Black women remaining in the same unfree labor positions after abolition, effectively extending their slavery into the latter half of the nineteenth century despite their legal statuses as free.[187] However, this emphasis on stagnance in labor positions is conflated with a stagnance in class status and, moreover, a stagnance in unfreedoms. Increasingly obscure and objectified portraits of freed Black women emerge in relation to physically elevated or whitened *signares*, demonstrating that while freed Black women maintained the same unfree labor positions, their class status and their position within the French colonial consciousness was pushed further down to a place that was more unfree than before.

While the nineteenth century in Saint Louis and Gorée was defined by its contradictions, especially about women of color's statuses, it is also critical context for the debates over subjecthood, citizenship, and French nationality that came in the early twentieth century. The conclusion that freed Black women remained in the same unfree labor positions is important for these debates, but without the idea that freed Black women were forced lower in the colonial hierarchy after abolition, the French ideological developments in the early twentieth century arrive too neatly from the contradictions of the nineteenth century. The formalization of the French colonial project, the calcification of French ideas about race, gender, and class, and Black slave women's diminishment within the French colonial consciousness in the nineteenth century set the stage for the development of an "incomplete or empty legal status" for Africans in the French Empire in the twentieth century.[188] The *signares*, paradoxically real and imagined in this

[187] See Chapter Three under "Freed Black Women: Unfree After Abolition."
[188] Semley, *To Be Free and French*, 211.

research, allow us to define these developments, granting us clarity during one of the most ideologically complex eras in French colonial history.

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