

## Moreau de Saint-Mery, on "Race" in Saint Domingue

Excerpted from *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue*. 3 vols.(Philadelphia, 1797).

Translated by [John Garrigus](#)

[beginning page 34]

Those who arrive in Saint-Domingue are foreigners to almost everyone they find there. They most often speak to others only of their plans for leaving them; because the general craze is to speak of returning or traveling to France. Each stresses that he is leaving next year and considers himself just a traveller in a land that so many will never leave. This sad idea is so common that they refuse those little conveniences that make life interesting. A planter thinks of himself as camping on a property worth several million, his home is that of a tenant who does not plan to stay much longer; his luxury, if he needs it, is in servants and in good fare, such that one would think that he is nothing more than a lodger in a boarding house.

This description of attitudes that could be described as widespread must be supplemented by those more particularly associated with creole whites, because several factors, especially the effects of an ever-burning sun, produce differences in inhabitants of the Torrid Zone that separate them from inhabitants of the temperate Zones.

### Of white creoles

Americans born in Saint-Domingue and called "creoles" (like all who are born in the colonies), are usually well built and of goodly height. They have regular features but these are without that tint with which nature brightens and embellishes complexions in cold countries. Their eyes are expressive and even suggest a sort of pride, which can produce an unfavorable bias against them at first impression.

Spared the tortures of swaddling, their limbs rarely show the slightest deformity. They are further favored by the temperature of the region which gives them an agility suitable for all physical activity, of which they are both fond and naturally gifted.

This rapid development of physical qualities; the perpetual wonder of unending growth in an environment whose fertility enriches this country; perhaps the ongoing sight of that basic factor that distinguishes them from the rest of the Universe; all together give the Creoles an active imagination and an easy-going outlook. These fortunate gifts would foretell success in all their undertakings, if such easy-goingness did not create a love of variety which becomes an obstacle, and if nature's gifts, so liberally bestowed in their childhood, did not usually become defects for themselves and sources of astonishment for onlookers.

Different factors work together to deprive young Creoles of their initial advantages over children in other climates. First of all is the blind and excessive affection of parents who agree with all their wishes and believe that this affection prohibits the least resistance. There is no whim that is not met, no behavior that is not excused, no fantasy that is not satisfied, or even encouraged: given enough time some become incorrigible. [Author's Note: "Everyone knows this story attributed to a Creole child and could describe many. -"Gimme egg," - "Don't got none." - "Cause dat gimme two." Which is to say: "I want an egg." - "There are none." - "Because of that I want two of them."

Happy is the Creole child whose good health assures him the unhealthy opportunity to experience all his parents' sensitivities. For if his life is in danger, if his health is frail, he cannot escape the misfortune of being idolized. All the whims of his illnesses are taken by his parents as proof of desires they don't believe he has the strength to express. Therefore they invent for him, they devote themselves to the most extravagant ideas; and if the personality of the Creole child, stronger than the obstacles posed by this servile attachment, triumphs over physical ills, the possibly indestructible seeds of moral disorder will threaten him the rest of his days.

Added to these disadvantages is the habit of being surrounded by slaves and to needing only to look to have the way cleared before you. No tyrant ever had as much unremitting homage, nor more constant worshippers than a Creole child. Each slave is subject to the changes in his mood and his childish piques only too often disturb the peace of the household, for he has only to order up an injustice for it to become the subject of a will that he is as yet unable to control.

Even in his games the Creole child is little more than a tyrant. Surrounded by little slaves condemned to pander to his whims, even more revolting, to renounce all those of their age, he will not tolerate the slightest vexation. What he sees, he wants, what is shown him, he demands; and if fate has it that one of his little companions resists him, he becomes annoyed, his cries summon the whole household and those unfortunate ones whose color marks them for submission immediately learn that they must give way and perhaps even that disobedience is punished in those not yet instinctively servile.

Nevertheless these very acts of shameful despotism often produce the good fortune of some slaves; because if the Creole child shows favor to certain slaves, they are guaranteed a better fate. And if the Creole adopts another child and he grows up with his master, one day, according to his sex, he will be either the object or the agent of his pleasures and this high status will spare him, and other slaves he may want to protect, from the injustices of the master.

However, these conditions which seem designed to suffocate any seeds of good in the soul of the creole, and to which must be added the dangers associated with the benefits of wealth, would have no effect if a careful education weighed in against these enemies of happiness. Brought down to earth, and retaining only his original inclinations like a sort of energy and loftiness that an attentive and intelligent teacher could transform into virtues, an American already blessed in his physical constitution would no longer be condemned to mediocrity.

But on this score one must pity the fate of Creoles. In France, usually, they are entrusted to persons who regard them as foreigners or to hirelings who deliver much less than they are paid for, they have little hope of benefiting from the imperfect education delivered by the schools to which they are relegated. No one stimulates them, no one encourages them. Unable to want success for its own sake, they wearily count the days spent in exile from their father's house and impatiently await the end of this period.

They only hear their parents spoken of in terms that instead of encouraging them to earn approval, make them believe that they already deserve it. They only hear of their parents in a way that reminds them of their parents' favoritism and the comparison of that earlier situation with the neglect in which they have fallen is scarcely likely to kindle their interest in studies whose only reward will be in the future.

Either in the colony or in France, this is how most Creoles arrive at the age when they must enter the world. All that further needs to be done to deny them any chance of becoming respected men is to cater to their taste for spending and for those kinds of pleasures that undermine the soul even more than excessive spending and to force them to give way on only a single issue, the very one that ought to be open, the choice of a profession; this choice is the pride of the father that makes it, perhaps from two thousand leagues away.

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This is how the young Creole loses sight of everything that is not capable of fulfilling his desires, scorning everything that is not connected with pleasure, devoting himself to the whirl that carries him away. Transported by his love of dance, music, celebrations and anything that attracts and maintains his madness, he seems to live only for sensual pleasures.

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How can such predilections not become dangerous in a place whose customs only encourage them? How can a hot-blooded personality be tamed in a place where a large class of women produced by the mix of Whites and slave women is interested only in avenging, with the weapons of pleasure, the degradation to which they are condemned? This is how passion musters all its power in the heart of most creoles

and when the snows of maturity finally arrive they do not always extinguish desire, the cruellest of all the passions.

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The Slaves

Although slaves are not the class of population immediately under that of the whites, it seems appropriate to speak of them before saying anything of the freedmen, since that group shows the outcome of the slavery of some and the freedom of others.

The observation that the white population is not entirely composed of Creoles must be repeated for the Slaves, since two-thirds of those (who are nearly all *negres*), come from Africa, while the rest is born in the colony. These two classes must be described separately, since in some respects they have more-or-less distinct characteristics.

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### Slaves from Africa

Saint-Domingue is the first place in the Americas to have had African slaves, and everyone knows that they were brought there for agriculture, according to Barthelemy Las Casas, who saw several brought to Saint-Domingue by chance after 1505. He suggested substituting them for the natives of the island, who were sorely tried by work in the mines and threatened to disappear completely from their native land. The idea of Las Casas, who was distracted by his very humaneness, was adopted because it presented more resources; for the unfortunate Indians were sacrificed to greed.

From their origins, all the French colonies in the Antilles had African slaves. But Saint-Domingue had them earlier, since its earliest conquerors had them more than a century and a half earlier. It seems that in the early attempts of the Adventurers there were only several *negres* that they had kidnapped either from the land or the ships of their enemies and it was only in devoting themselves to agriculture that the French colonists realized their genuine need for Africans. For a fairly long period they even farmed with their own hands, together with a sort of white slave called an indentured servant or "36 months," names expressing their servile status and its length.

Driven by the desire to tempt fate in the colonies, a variety of individuals sold themselves in France for 3 years to a ship captain who, for the price of their passage, sold them in turn to a colonist for a pre-arranged sum. But this custom, remarkably inspired by the English in the North American colonies where it still exists, despite independence, could not be sustained in the French islands. It was up to the period in which tobacco was the main and even sole object of the colonial trade that the indentured servants were considered appropriate for the same work as the *negres*. But the planting of indigo and especially that of sugar cane urgently demanded individuals more resistant to the continuous effects of a burning sun; and as those crops offered in turn through their profits, the ability to pay for *negres* that merchants took in Africa, the number of slaves has continually grown until the number I have already given, which now has risen to 452 thousand.

Physical characteristics vary widely among the *negres* because of the different ports of Africa where they were born. The most reliable method of noting these characteristics is to observe

their relations with these places themselves; all the more because this will illustrate how from many peoples the black population of the colony is taken.

[over the next 12 pages, Moreau describes the homelands and the physical and cultural characteristics of the *Senegalais*, the *Yoloffes*, the *Foules*, the *Bambaras*, the *Quiambas*, the *Mandigues*, the *Bissagots*, the *Bouriquis*, the *Miserables*, the *Mesurades*, the *Aradas*, the *Caplaous*, the *Mines*, the *Agouas*, the *Socos*, the *Fantins*, the *Cotocolis*, the *Popos*, the *Fidas*, the *Fonds*, the *Mais*, the *Aoussas*, the *Ibos*, the *Nagos*, the *Judas*, the *Congos*, the *Mayomedes*, the *Mosombes*, the *Mondongues*, the *Malimbes*, the *Franc-Congos*, the *Mozambiques*, the *Quiloi*, the *Qiriam*, and the *Montfiat*]

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### Of Creole Slaves

Creole slaves are born with physical and moral qualities which give them a real superiority over those brought from Africa, and the fact that domestication has improved the species, while supporting a conclusion of the sublime natural historian, may also belie the abuses for which despotic masters are criticized.

It is nevertheless clear that the qualities of the Creole *negre* have within themselves degrees of comparison, because the product of two Creole *negres*, for example, is superior to that of two Bambara *negres*, and so on with other combinations and mixings of different peoples; and this last reason is perhaps one of the most influential. In addition to intelligence, the Creole *negre* possesses a graceful figure, lithe movements, a pleasing face and a gentle language unburdened with any of the accents added by Africans. Accustomed from their birth to the products of human genius, their minds are less obtuse than those of Africans who sometimes cannot grasp the difference between pocket change; in a way that he sometimes insists on having the exact coin he was told to ask for or he will not sell. There is no task for which Creole *negres* are not preferred, and their value is always at least a quarter above that of Africans, all else being equal. Creole are, generally preferred for domestic work and for different trades. It is obvious that, having been raised with whites or near them, the latter grow more attached to them and destine them for less difficult tasks and a more pleasant life, notably one with better food.

The development of *negre* children is commonly faster among Creoles than among those who are brought from Africa at a young age, undoubtedly because nature is set back by the process of acclimation. The young creole *negresses* are mature earlier than young Africans. It seems to me that this last difference can be attributed to precocious sexual pleasure which upsets the physical order and perverts the moral order, and which the young Creole *negre* has more opportunity to explore. Especially in the towns, examples of this moral corruption can frequently be seen in women who were not children long enough. It is further distressing, though no less true, that this grievous acceleration is sometimes the result of a calculation designed to benefit their mothers, who should be revolted by the very idea of such a

commerce; for they know that a *negresse*, wherever she is born, will spend her whole life in a kind of dependence on the man who plucks that most precious of all flowers, even if she no longer loves him, and, more strangely, even if she never loved him. It has not been sufficiently realized that one of the obstacles to the reproduction of *negres* is this early motherhood, or the abuses that delay motherhood.

I will restrict myself for now to what I have said about the class of *negres*, which includes in some manner all the slaves in Saint-Domingue. Among these are those descended from Caribe Indians, from Indians of Guyana, from Fox savages of Canada, from the Natchez of Louisiana, that the government or men violating the Rights of Peoples found necessary or profitable to enslave.

I forgot to say what most sets the Creole *negre* apart from the African, which is that following the example of the English colonists, the planters of the French colony brand their names or initials on the chests of the-Africans; while the others are only [branded] in the extremely rare case where their masters want to humiliate them, precisely because custom usually exempts them. The size of the colony, the fact it is neighbored by a foreign colony, all brought about the adoption of this precaution which is not at all painful. It is nevertheless an obstacle for an African who leaves slavery and becomes a freeman, for by prolonging the memory of his earlier status, it can sometimes raise doubts about his freedom.

But let's see who these freedmen are; I will have ample opportunity in describing this immense colony to round off the character and the ways of the slaves and I will find more occasions to depict the most striking things in the proper context.

#### Of the Freedmen

The freedmen are universally known as "people of color or "mixed-bloods" although this name, taken exactly, could also refer to enslaved *negres*. As soon as the colony had slaves it had freedmen, and several causes seem to have coincided to form this intermediary class between master and slave. In Saint-Domingue slaves were not only *negres*, but also Indians and savages only distinguished from *negres* by their color. The scarcity of women, the ways of the freebooters and buccaneers, the lure of the submissive *negresses* produced mulattoes whose skin color put them in a class with Indians and savages, as is seen in the census of 1681, where they are all mixed together, numbering 480; but at that time, only whites were free.

The men who unscrupulously enslaved savages and indians, colored like mulattoes, nevertheless felt a particular way for these, and by a kind of agreement, whose origins must lie in paternal affection and pride, it became established that when mulattoes reached their 21st year, they would leave slavery. Nevertheless more than once personal greed broke this unofficial custom and mulatto lost this advantage when the Code Noir established rules about the role of slaves in colonial inheritances, and only those whose masters had formally given up their rights in writing were recognized as freedmen. Such freedmen had existed well before 1685, since the edict of March of that year, prepared by the Superior Councils and colonial

administrators several years before, legalized manumission [when] voluntarily extended by a master, and in the censuses of the beginning of the present century show about 500 free people of all ages and all sexes, although sometimes distinguishing between free *negres* and free mulattoes; undoubtedly because this latter group was mixed in with the descendants of Indians and savages among whom should naturally be more freedmen because female Indians or savages scorned the *negres* while whites loved the gentle and faithful personality and the secret lures of these women.

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The first observation that the existence of this class inspires is that it was in the heart of France that laws were made for maintaining the servitude of Africans in America; that it was France which thought to take for itself the product of the slave trade which the colonies are forbidden to practice directly; that the profit of this monopoly was for France and that colonists themselves came up with the idea of manumission, that happy agreement that re-establishes a slave in the rights of humanity; which allows a master to satisfy his sense of justice or generosity to the advantage of the slave and the political strength of the colonies; to be truly respectable, this idea needs only the addition of the master's promise to guarantee the livelihood of the freedman until he can provide his own, or in case age or infirmity condemns him to poverty.

As might be easily seen, the freedmen are individuals, with a great variety in their color due to their mixing with whites, with *negres* and among themselves mixes which can be produced by different combinations and which, in turn, give birth to new combinations. The two extremes for these freedmen are on one side the *negre* and on the other, individuals whose color has no perceptible difference from that of whites, when one compares.

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[Here the author provides 13 tables showing the multiple combinations that might produce a mulatto child, a quadroon child, etc.]

[from page 89]

There are, therefore, thirteen distinct classes of skin color among the individuals who constitute the population of French Saint-Domingue.

I have already spoken of those who must be considered the elements and bases of all the others, that is the white and the black about which the colonial prejudice has adopted as a maxim that no matter how close to white a non-white woman is, a white can never come from their union; in the same way no matter how close to *negre* a woman of color may be, they can never produce a new person who goes down to the level of *negre*. In more simple terms, therefore, only whites mixed among themselves can make whites and *negres* can only be produced by two *negres* of the two sexes.

The third shade is that of mulatto which can almost always be divided into two, since mulattoes, when compared, have two very distinct colors which are red-copper and yellow-bronze. They all have kinky hair.

The mulatto is produced in twelve different ways; because in this case as in all the others, I take as one sole combination that of a mulatto man with a white woman and that of a white man with a mulatto woman, since only the sex has changed.

1. The mulatto coming from a white man and a *negre* woman and who is truly the average proportionately, of the two.
2. The mulatto coming from a mixed blood man with a *negre* woman.
3. The mulatto coming from a quadrooned man with a Sacatra.
4. The mulatto coming from a quadrooned man with a *negre* woman.
5. The mulatto coming from a mamelouc with a Sacatra.
6. The mulatto coming from a mamelouc with a *negre* woman.
7. The mulatto coming from a Mestif with a Sacatra.
8. The mulatto coming from a Mestif with a *negre* woman.
9. The darker mulatto, coming from a quadroon with a griffe woman.
10. The darker mulatto, coming from a quadroon with a Sacatra.
- 11 The darker mulatto, coming from a mulatto with a Marabou and who is of an even darker copper.
12. Finally the mulatto produced by a mulatto with a mulatto. This is called a "free mulatto" or "casque."

Of all the combination of white and *negre* it the mulatto who brings together all of the physical advantages; of all of these crossings of race he is the one who has the strongest constitution, the most appropriate to Saint-Domingue's climate. To the sobriety and the strength of the *negre* he joins the physical grace and the intelligence of the white. He lives to an advanced age and if his skin becomes spotted as he ages, he has only the ugliness of age, but not its lapses. Beardless like the *negre*, like him he has a certain woolly character to his hair, but his body hair is longer. Lazy, he is nevertheless passionate about physical exercise and especially riding and that which brings one sex towards the other. More than any other he is a man of this burning climate, of this zone where men seem to be devoted to pleasure.

[Moreau devotes 11 more pages to the topic of racial mixture and the physical and behavioral results he attributes to it]