

2008

# Postcolonial writing in Louisiana: surpassing the role of French traditionalism in Alfred Mercier's *L'habitation Saint-Ybars*

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POSTCOLONIAL WRITING IN LOUISIANA: SURPASSING THE ROLE OF  
FRENCH TRADITIONALISM IN ALFRED MERCIER'S *L'HABITATION SAINT-  
YBARS*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

In

The Department of French Studies

by  
Mary F. Cashell  
A.B., The College of William and Mary, 2006  
May 2008

*Je me souviens de la grande harmonie  
Des flots du lac qui baignaient mes pieds nus ;  
Là je lisais Paul et sa Virginie,  
On sourirait à mes pleurs ingénus.*

Alfred Mercier

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank, first of all, Dr. Jack Yeager, whose advice, guidance, and encouragement made the completion of this project possible. Without his keen eye, this paper would surely be a mass of comma splices. I am also indebted to the other members of my committee for their invaluable comments and suggestions, Dr. Rosemary Peters and Dr. Katharine Jensen. Finally, I would like to thank my family for their love and support.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores the roles of French patriarchal ideologies of the Enlightenment and exoticism in Alfred Mercier's novel, L'habitation Saint-Ybars. His novel portrays the antebellum Creole plantation as a hierarchy of strict gender roles similar to those that Enlightenment philosophy espoused. I use the family in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's classic, Paul et Virginie, as one example of such a hierarchy. There are also, however, several instances where Mercier departs from the paternalistic norm. I interpret Mercier's moving away from this model to be a declaration of a unique Louisianian identity.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the first explorers of the New World related their findings back home, the European imagination has fixated on the both fascinating and daunting landmass of the North American continent. With an unknown world came new ideals, a new perspective, and endless possibilities. Those adventure-seekers brave enough to embark and strong enough to survive the journey were certainly not disappointed. In both of France's settlements in North America, Louisiana and Québec, collectively referred to as New France, the colonists met with much hardship and suffering. Conflict with the indigenous peoples, extreme weather, and failed agricultural endeavors all combined to frustrate their attempts to colonize.

Any historian could attest to the severity of the consequences resulting from these ordeals (Gayarré 71-78; Fortier 98-140). Yet, perhaps more damaging to colonial development than the acute physical suffering was the colonists' inner turmoil following an estrangement from their native land. Once having learned to adapt to life amidst the violent defensive attacks by the natives and in intense climates, the Anglo-French hostilities of the Seven Years' War, culminating in the 1763 Treaty of Paris, caused a radical shift in French perceptions of their investment across the Atlantic. Their defeat by the British was a source of extreme embarrassment and New France served now only as a reminder of French failure. Great minds of the eighteenth century reflected on the situation and expressed disparaging views. Voltaire and L'Abbé Prévost in particular underscored the colonies' irrelevance to French identity with their declarations on the wildness of the New World that disconnected colonists from their national identity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Voltaire's, *Candide*, offers a famous instance of this sense of insignificance : "Vous savez que ces deux nations sont en guerre pour quelques arpents de neige vers le Canada, et qu'elles dépensent pour cette belle

Even before the war was over, France traded its holdings in Louisiana, along with those who settled it, to the kingdom of Spain in the 1762 Treaty of Fontainebleau. This moment, perhaps more than any other in the colony's history, was integral in the construction of a society unique to Louisiana.

Starting as early as the sixteenth century, men and women from France left their homes in Europe to begin new lives and to help form a new French state. Their intentions were to recreate France, "perfected" in the New World. What actually resulted, however, was a completely new hybrid state, consisting of a mixture of French ethics and principles in the North American theater. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, this post colony, literally, had forged its own distinct culture and a new identity and was on its way to becoming an active participant in the intellectual world.

Now, English-language works such as those by Kate Chopin, Tennessee Williams, or George Washington Cable, serve as the basis of public awareness of Louisiana literature. While they appear on American public school reading lists, Louisiana's French-language writings have faded into obscurity. The world of academic research has also neglected them as traditional postcolonial scholars have yet to consider French-language Louisianian texts. Even so, the literature springing from this new culture demonstrates many of the key characteristics of more well-known postcolonial texts. Well-established postcolonial writers such as Aimé Césaire and Maryse Condé evoke the themes of distorted formations of identity and a search for cultural independence that Louisianian authors share.

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guerre beaucoup plus que tout le Canada ne vaut" Voltaire, Candide (New York: Dover Publications, Inc: 1993) 120,122.



The particular problem specific to postcolonial literature from North America is a dichotomy of identity. The dilemma of appropriation, that is—to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own—functions in reverse. While maintaining a political and cultural connection to the motherland, their French spirit is no longer intact. The authors romanticize their own situation while at the same time clearly reacting against outside cultural subjugation. In essence, these authors play both the role of colonizer and colonized. This hybrid identity is no surprise given that society in Louisiana stems from its beginnings as a settler colony, a potent producer of hybridity.

Literature offers us a glimpse of the world as others experienced it in a different time or locale. The nineteenth-century texts from Louisiana are one example of how narrative fiction opens up the past. Creole<sup>2</sup> authorship offers a look at North America's past from a unique perspective. This is not only due to their French heritage but also to their key location in terms of the nineteenth-century politicizing of United States geography as a result of the Civil War. They were neither ignorant of their French heritage nor of their unique perspective as a result of their distinctive lineage. Writers such as Alfred Mercier, Alexandre Latil, and brothers Dominique and Adrien Rouquette were born into well-to-do families and aware of their French ancestry and their obligations to their relations. Many were, however, also second and third generation Louisianians and had a keen appreciation of their uniqueness in this regard.

In order to study Louisiana as a postcolonial society, I will look at an important nineteenth-century Creole novel, Alfred Mercier's L'habitation Saint-Ybars (1881). This

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<sup>2</sup> The term "Creole" carries many meanings depending on a particular context. Here, I use the term to mean a person of European, French descent born and raised in the New World: Louisiana. Later in this thesis, I will also use the term to connote a hybrid dialect stemming from a European language, specifically French.

text is the story of a French Creole *habitation*<sup>3</sup> situated on the banks of the Mississippi River. In this semi-autobiographical and remarkable melodrama, the author presents characters which reflect French patriarchal social ideals, and, more importantly, function as vehicles for his vision of Louisiana's capacity for progression. The goal of this study is to demonstrate how Francophone Louisianian literature serves, not only as an important component of the canon of French and Francophone literatures, but also as a declaration of identity and individuality. Louisiana's French-language writings reflect the clashing cultures which were melding into one distinct identity. For example, many Creole authors construct characters that adhere to idealized gender roles. These roles originate in a pre-Revolutionary French paternalistic philosophy which developed into a French reality following the Revolution. Yet, Creoles themselves simultaneously hybridize their literary constructs by exoticizing the Louisianian context through emphasizing the landscape, altering the novel's perspective, and character construction. The combination of European rationality and New World romanticism produces literature that suggests an equally amalgamated self. Through an analysis of Mercier's work, we can gain a deeper understanding of both the vastness of the effects of colonialism and the meanings of French and American literary identities.

An investigation of the political parallels between eighteenth-century France and nineteenth-century Louisiana<sup>4</sup> will demonstrate that both of these societies base themselves off of family social models. With an understanding of the extent to which

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<sup>3</sup> This word usually translates as 'home' or 'lodging' in standard French. In the case of this novel, however, *habitation* seems to be used as a French equivalent to 'plantation'.

<sup>4</sup> In 1750, the name Louisiana referred to an area stretching from the Gulf coast to the Great Lakes and bounded by the Appalachians in the East and the Rockies in the West. By the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the Mississippi River formed the Eastern boundary and New Spain the Southern. For further information, see: David P. Currie, "The Constitution in Congress: Jefferson and the West, 1801-1809" William and Mary Law Review. 39.5 (1998) 1441-1503.

French social philosophy influenced legislature in Louisiana, we can examine Alfred Mercier's novel, L'habitation Saint-Ybars, in both French and American literary contexts. This perhaps less obvious approach will raise many essential questions regarding Mercier's novel, such as where the author places his homeland and to what tradition this novel belongs. To deepen my argument, I will use the island society that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre constructs in his novel Paul et Virginie (1787) as an expression of the gender roles that eighteenth-century French society demanded, particularly for women. In addition to providing a model for female social roles, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre supplies a template for the entire family unit. This unit functions as his primary subject, demonstrating how, even in a parallel setting away from France, family demands took precedence over an individual's desires. Mercier uses this perspective as well, rather than focusing on an individual character. He also etches out a clear picture of the strict regulation of gender-appropriate behavior in the plantation hierarchy. These details in themselves reveal how solidly French notions figure in these novels, and, more surprisingly, in Louisiana Creole identity. Furthermore, the Napoleonic Code, itself a product gendered social discourse, manifests itself in the civil code of Louisiana, while supplying the tools to develop a social culture parallel to France's. As a result, on this *habitation*, family roles serve as the determining factors for an individual's social power.

It is where Mercier diverges from this traditionalist discourse, however, that the reader is able to discern the author's distinctive Louisianian voice. I will argue for a reading of this novel as postcolonial literature by unveiling this individuality.

Characteristics peculiar to those of a writer in a post colony complicate Mercier's text

beyond a simple picture of a Creole plantation. He reveals Louisiana's uniqueness as an autonomous state in an effort to erase the cultural trauma of the colonial period.

### **Alfred Mercier**

Alfred Mercier's roots run deep in the French colonial world, as we can tell from only a brief look at his family history. His father, Jean Mercier, was born in 1772 near the Bordeaux town of Blanquefort. At the age of twenty-one, this young man left France and headed to the colony of Louisiana to escape the dangerous social climate following the 1789 Revolution.<sup>5</sup> He settled on a plantation just south of New Orleans in Jefferson Parish and married a young woman from Canada, Marie Eloise Leduc. The couple had five children and the youngest of these they named Jean Justin Charles Alfred Mercier. Alfred Mercier was born on the family plantation in McDonoghville, June 3, 1816.<sup>6</sup>

While detailed information about his childhood is scanty, according to Gloria Robertson's thesis, The Diaries of Dr. Alfred Mercier: 1879-1893, by the age of thirteen he was already a devoted student of Greek and Latin and classical literatures (34). He attended school and also had the instruction of a tutor, Pierre Soulé, a politician and young Alfred's favorite sister's husband (Robertson 35). At fourteen, he traveled to France to study at the *Collège Louis-le-Grand* in Paris, where his elder brother Armand was already a student. Mercier excelled in his learning in Paris. He worked hard, completing two years' worth of studies in one. He received an award recognizing his efforts in Latin verse as well (Robertson 37). Not only did young Mercier immerse himself in scholarly subjects, he was also a passionate devotee of his contemporary writers. Edward Laroque Tinker elaborates: "Il dévorait les livres et consacrait tous ses

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<sup>5</sup> This was a common reason for emigrating in the eighteenth century.

<sup>6</sup> There is some confusion as to Mercier's exact date of birth, due to inconsistencies in various official documents. According to Robertson, June 3, 1816 seems to be the most likely date.

loisirs à Walter Scott, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Chateaubriand et Lamartine” (351).

Despite passing his examinations in law, Mercier much preferred the literary environment to the courtroom. In 1838, he left his legal studies and spent many years traveling extensively, improving his multilingual skills, and writing. A return to Paris in 1842 saw the publication of Alfred Mercier’s first book, a duo of romantic poems entitled *Rose de Smyrne* and *Ermite du Niagara*. Throughout the next several decades, Mercier divided his time between Paris and New Orleans and published a multitude of texts.<sup>7</sup> In addition, he was instrumental in founding Louisiana’s first French literary society, l’Athénée Louisianais. L’habitation Saint-Ybars was one of the Alfred Mercier’s later texts. Published in 1881, it remains one of the most original works of the nineteenth-century literary movement of Francophone Louisiana. This novel provides the only description of a Creole plantation in Louisiana as it was before the ravages of the Civil War (Tinker 357).

### **L’habitation Saint-Ybars, ou Maîtres et Esclaves en Louisiane: Récit Social**

The story of L’habitation Saint-Ybars concerns a Creole family, the Saint-Ybars, living outside New Orleans on a plantation by the Mississippi.<sup>8</sup> At the outset of the novel, we meet a young Frenchman, Antony Pélasge, who fought for the Republicans in the Revolution of 1848. Pélasge’s French perspective guides the reader through the story.

The plantation’s mansion is home to M. and Mme Saint-Ybars, their children, including the two youngest, twins Chant-d’Oisel and Démon, and their grandfather, Vieumaite (“Ole Massa”). Relations in the house are strained. Démon is a poor student

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<sup>7</sup> For a listing of more of Mercier’s works see: Appendix A.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed summary of the plot see: Appendix B.

and misunderstood by his family. Mme Saint-Ybars is a quiet, nervous lady who often faces verbal and physical abuse from her husband within their failing relationship. M. Saint-Ybars is mostly to blame as his daughter's charming governess, Mlle Nogolka from Russia, has captivated him. Chant-d'Oisel herself is a relatively unobtrusive character yet she often shows her good will. In the opening scene at a slave emporium, she comes upon a beautiful, pale-skinned slave girl about to be purchased by two sinister-looking men. She senses danger and tells her father that she would like the girl as a birthday present. At first reluctant, he eventually agrees and buys the young woman, Titia.

Other essential members of the Saint-Ybars household include two slaves. Mamrie, Mme Saint-Ybars' personal maid and the twins' wet-nurse, is a personage of compassion and devotion who maintains an intimate bond with Démon. The second slave, Lauzon, is M. Saint-Ybars' valet. He capitalizes on his elevated status as the first child of Saint-Ybars' eldest son, though illegitimate, to get away with terrible mischief. Adding to their community, the Saint-Ybars engage Antony Pélasge as a new tutor for their son. In just a few days, Pélasge develops a lasting bond with Démon.

On a stormy night, M. Saint-Ybars attempts to rape Mlle Nogolka. She manages to escape, but this outbreak of violence signals more to come. The next morning, Mamrie discovers a baby left by the house, presumably the previous night and the family decides to adopt her. No one knows who she is or who left her. The child is the fairest Chant-d'Oisel has ever seen, and she names her Blanchette. The baby is in fact mixed race and the new slave girl's, Titia, love child with her last owner. Although later on her identity poses a difficulty, at present she is a joyful addition to the plantation. For M. Saint-Ybars, however, Blanchette brings no joy and his temper remains as bad as ever. When

his wife accidentally tips over a bowl of soup, he mocks and viciously insults her until Démon yells for his father to stop. After a violent fight Démon runs away. Full of remorse, M. Saint-Ybars sends a search party out to look for him and they find him stranded in the middle of a surging river. Both father and son nearly drown in the rescue but the intensity of the situation helps to repair the rift between them.

Subsequently, Mlle Nogolka decides to leave and Pélasge encourages Démon to recover at school in Paris. Before her departure, Mlle Nogolka tells Pélasge of her secret love for him. Pélasge is unable to return her affections but as a show of amity, he reveals his love for Chant-d'Oisel. The two part on good terms.

Following this is the Civil War. M. Saint-Ybars dies fighting and most of the former inhabitants of the plantation scatter. Only Pélasge, Chant-d'Oisel, Blanchette, and the now mentally deteriorating Mme Saint-Ybars along with Mamrie remain. Démon stays in Paris, unaware of his family's privations. In fact, Chant-d'Oisel's health declines rapidly, yet Pélasge and Chant-d'Oisel determine to realize their love. They marry but she dies immediately after the ceremony. Démon finally returns after his sister's death. He no longer speaks in the Creole he used as a youth, which strains his intimacy with Mamrie. Seeing Blanchette grown up, however, he falls in love with her. When Lauzun discovers the girl's true race and reveals it to everyone, Démon enters a duel to protect her honor and wins. Their happiness seems hopeless, however, and he poisons himself. When Blanchette discovers Démon dying she shoots herself. Mamrie learns of the tragedy and vows revenge. She kills Lauzun and herself. With her death, only ruins remain of the Saint-Ybars *habitation*. Pélasge has nothing and decides to write to Mlle Nogolka. She is married to an older Russian philosopher who welcomes Pélasge's

coming. The Third Republic is dawning and the three determine to work for the betterment of humanity.

Just from a summary of the novel's drama, we can see how each character's development hangs on idealized gender constructs. Mme Saint-Ybars's docile obedience and Chant-d'Oisel's physical weakness in particular influence their function in the story. The roles that Mercier assigns to his characters unmistakably reflect those which stem from a French masculinist discourse that aims to remove female influence from the social sphere. Even so, hidden within the plantation's social hierarchy are liberal deviations from the traditionally-minded narrative. Let us now examine these notions of gender and their social and literary interpretations in France and in Louisiana.



## **SOCIAL PARALLELS: THE FAMILY MODEL IN FRANCE AND LOUISIANA**

The belief that family relations serve as the foundation for social hierarchy is fundamental in the history of the French conception of society. In fact, *ancien régime* social structure in France resembled that of a paternalistic family. Lynn Hunt explains: “The king [was] the head of a social body held together by bonds of deference; peasants deferred to their landlords, journeymen to their masters, great magnates to their king, wives to their husbands, and children to their parents” (3). From this we can see that the social hierarchy formed in a pyramid structure headed by the king and branched out into the various estates, each level answering to its superior. Jean-Jacques Rousseau states in his 1762 work, Du Contrat Social: “La famille est donc, si l’on veut, le premier modèle des sociétés politiques : le chef est l’image du père, le peuple est l’image des enfants” (14). This statement underscores the importance of a child’s, or subordinate’s, obedience and respect for the parent, or superior. Rousseau’s text certainly offers an indication of the French society’s dependence on the family model.

Despite the reigning patriarchy in pre-Revolutionary France, numerous women held important public roles and maintained a strong influence on society. Many of these women were *salonnières* (Landes 24). They were leaders in French culture and social affairs and their salons functioned as classrooms for the “man of whatever social origin who appropriated to himself noble *civilité*” (Landes 25). On the eve of the Revolution, however, the influence of women on the public sphere began to create concern. The king especially, under the influence of his mistresses, the marquise de Pompadour and the comtesse Du Barry, was depicted as weak, soft, and feminized, certainly no longer

capable of leading a kingdom (Hunt 90). Men thus called for social and political change in order to insure male dominance.

In order to safely return the public realm to men, Rousseau and Montesquieu, among others, advised a relegation of women to the domestic sphere. The prevailing vision cast men as husbands and fathers who assumed the role as head of the family unit. Much as the French king had ruled the French, fathers would reign supreme over the other members of the household. Moreover, they alone would be able to act in the public sphere. Women, wives and mothers would serve a primarily domestic function and had little agency outside the home. Inside the home they were considered the source of morality and virtue. A woman's role in the family was to carry out household duties, particularly those involving children. This ideal woman, obedient, docile, and with a heightened sense of morality became a pillar of the Revolution.

Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's novel testifies to this. It was one of many written during this time that followed a trend attempting to edit out Father figures. While images of mothers, brothers, and sisters took on a pivotal role in the new revolutionary family, Hunt explains that "fictional fathers began to be effaced; they were lost, absent, dead, or simply unknown" (23). This stems from the budding Revolution's rejection of the king as an integral part of the monarchical system, as well as of his person. The public effectively severed the tie between France and the king's body by emphasizing mothers and children and representing the country with female figures. Revolutionaries turned to female figures to represent the spirit of the Revolution. According to Hunt:

Most representations of the republic were feminine, and they almost always showed young women, often virginal, but sometimes with very young children.

Young women appear almost promiscuously in official representations, for they could be and were used to represent every imaginable political attribute such as Liberty, Reason, Wisdom, Victory, and even Force. (82)

The images of femininity they conjured up, however, hardly supported women's causes. Because this was a male vision of the ideal woman, the situation did not, in fact, empower real women.

Interestingly, France's familial social model survived the devastation of the Revolution and carried on into the creation of the first Empire. In her book on the Revolutionary family, Susan Desan declares that "[the codifiers] agreed on the need to reassert male authority over women and children as a key step toward soothing domestic discord" (289). As Desan shows, Napoleon's civil law codifiers adopted much that masculinist discourse in which Rousseau and Montesquieu engaged. These laws proved to have some of the most widespread influences of any other legislation, thanks in part to Napoleon's exploits abroad. Like their neighboring countries, France's colonial empire adopted the legislation.

According to Charles Phinneas Sherman in his extensive work on the influence of Roman law in the modern world, Napoleonic codifications influenced the legislatures in various European countries, in Asia, and in Central and South America, among other places. Not surprisingly, Napoleon's civil code likewise affected former French colonies such as Québec and Louisiana (Sherman, C.P. 248). Despite Louisiana's singular experience as an object of trade among three countries--France, Spain and the United States--throughout its history, Francophone Louisianians generally turned to *La Patrie*

for legislative guidance, which they demonstrated in their adoption of the French model of law as their own.

While espousing a civil code similar to the French Civil Code of 1804 is an obvious legislative link, it is not the first instance of a transatlantic spread of French law in Louisiana's history. In Vaughn Baker's collaborative essay with Amos Simpson and Mathé Allain we see that, "civil government began in Louisiana in 1712 when Louis XIV ceded the colony to Antoine Crozat" (7). As a result of this transfer, Crozat, the first proprietary owner of French Louisiana, received a royal charter from the king of France.<sup>9</sup> This charter, called the *Coutume de Paris*, established Louis XV's edicts as law in Louisiana. The document covered a wide legal range and included such civil laws as those governing marriage and the rights of women. The *Coutume* considered women to hold a so-called "divinely ordained" position in society: one beneath that which men occupied. Not only would a wife's duties include giving due respect to her husband, they also obliged her to submit herself to him completely. This is specifically outlined in article 225 of the document: "Le Mari est Seigneur" (qtd. in Baker 8). Even at this early stage in the colony's history, the similarities of the developing Louisiana legislature and the French regime are undeniable.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, following a turbulent period filled with questions about allegiance and loyalty, the United States government purchased the territory from Napoleon in the famous Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Three years

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<sup>9</sup> For more information on Antoine Crozat and his role in the development of the colony of Louisiana, see: H.E. Bolton, *The Colonization of North America* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1920) 278; John Clark, *New Orleans, 1718-1812: An Economic History* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 1970) 8.

afterward, in 1806, the territory of Orleans' administration<sup>10</sup> appointed several lawyers to prepare a Civil Code (Haas 4). By 1808, the document was complete. "This compilation was based on the Napoleonic Code of 1804, the works of Domat, Pothier, and Aguesseau being used to supplement the deficiencies of the [Civil Code in] Louisiana" (Sherman C.P. 251). The Louisianian authors supplied what they could, although for the most part they borrowed directly from the Napoleonic Code, Pothier and Domat being two of the original crafters of the Napoleonic Code (Sherman C.P. 237-40).

While in terms of some legal rights women benefited from the resulting Louisiana Civil Code of 1808, little improved in their overall status in the transatlantic passage: "The Louisiana Civil Code allowed married women more control over the property that they brought into the marriage [...] Wives could sell, mortgage, donate, and will their personal and real property, *assuming they had the approval of their husbands*" (McMillen 43, my emphasis). Women's perceived weakness destined them to roles which entailed domination and subjection. The idealized vision of women presented in Mercier's novel confirms this observation.

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<sup>10</sup> After the Louisiana Purchase all land south of the 33<sup>rd</sup> parallel became the Territory of Orleans, the rest being named the District of Louisiana. The Territory of Orleans encompasses what is now the state of Louisiana minus the Florida parishes. For further information, see: David P. Currie, "The Constitution in Congress: Jefferson and the West, 1801-1809" William and Mary Law Review, 39.5 (1998) 1441-1503.

## REFIGURING THE FAMILY ON L'ILE DE FRANCE

One of the dominant images in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's work, Paul et Virginie, is the maternal realm that the family inhabits. Two husbandless women raise their children, a boy and a girl, in their secluded home on Ile de France along with two slaves. As I've already stated, family and state are inextricably intertwined in French culture in both old and "new" régimes. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his effort to democratize old political hierarchies, has particularly emphasized the French social frame's dependence on family. In his discussion of social contract in the text Du Contrat Social, Rousseau captures the essence of relation between family and state:

La plus ancienne de toutes les sociétés et la seule naturelle est celle de la famille : encore les enfants ne restent-ils liés au père qu'aussi longtemps qu'ils ont de lui besoin pour se conserver. Sitôt que ce besoin cesse, le lien naturel se dissout. Les enfants, exempts de l'obéissance qu'ils devaient au père, le père, exempts des soins qu'il devait aux enfants, rentrent tous également dans l'indépendance. S'ils continuent de rester unis, ce n'est plus naturellement, c'est volontairement ; et la famille elle-même ne se maintient que par convention. Cette liberté commune est une conséquence de la nature de l'homme. Sa première loi est de veiller à sa propre conservation, ses premiers soins sont ceux qu'il se doit à lui-même ; et sitôt qu'il est en âge de raison, lui seul étant juge des moyens propres à le conserver, devient par là son propre maître. La famille est donc, si l'on veut, le premier modèle des sociétés politiques : le chef est l'image du père, le peuple est l'image des enfants ; et tous, étant nés égaux et libres, n'aliènent leur liberté que pour leur utilité. Toute la différence est que dans la famille, l'amour du père pour

ses enfants le paye des soins qu'il leur rend ; et que, dans l'état, le plaisir de commander supplée à cet amour que le chef n'a pas pour ses peuples. (11-14)

As the philosopher explains it, social organization derives from those relationships that are the most fundamental and “*naturelle*” to humanity, those of family. That Bernardin de Saint-Pierre restructures the family into a matriarchy is significant in terms of his vision for French social structure. This is, in fact, an attempt to recreate society through the family.

Rousseau's attachment to familial bonds is due to the eighteenth-century belief that the civilizing force of European society had corrupted humanity's natural purity. According to those who subscribed to this theory, the remedy for the corruption of European society and what is necessary for truly virtuous and moral living is a return to nature. In a state of nature, humanity would develop virtuously, naturally. Sarah Maza points out in her article “The Bourgeois Family Revisited” that, “The sentimental narrative...suggests the superiority of natural virtue and justice over conventional social divisions” (Maza 45). It is precisely this natural sentiment that compels Bernardin de Saint-Pierre to turn to a family bound together by love as his focus in Paul et Virginie.

Like the emphasis on family, the author's choice of Ile de France as the setting for his novel is no accident. The island deliberately acts as a sanctuary from the perceived immorality of civilized Europe. Madame de la Tour and Marguerite, the two mothers, are refugees from corrupted *ancien régime* society. Both of the women have, in the dehumanized eyes of French society, erred in their romantic lives, the former having married beneath her social status and the latter not having married at all. In their island paradise, they are sheltered from the discrimination of the old world system: “Elles

trouvaient chez elles la propreté, la liberté...” (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre 98). Nature provides these so-called fallen women a shelter in which they can flourish. The two live off the land and are able to support themselves. In Europe, their fates would be sealed. In a tropical paradise, by contrast, they can create their own self-sustaining society insulated from outsiders and envelop themselves with the goodness of nature (Mornet 435). What is more, being in the lush, fertile environment seems to intensify the women’s maternal experience:

Les devoirs de la nature ajoutaient encore au bonheur de leur société. Leur amitié mutuelle redoublait à la vue de leurs enfants, fruits d’un amour également infortuné. Elles prenaient plaisir à les mettre ensemble dans le même bain, et à les coucher dans le même berceau. Souvent elles les changeaient de lait. ‘Mon amie, disait madame de la Tour, chacune de nous aura deux enfants, et chacun de nos enfants aura deux mères.’ (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre 98)

Madame de la Tour and Marguerite realize their ultimate duty as mothers by nurturing their children, a task that a male discourse already glorified. Once in the bountiful splendor of Ile de France, however, breastfeeding becomes a powerful experience. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre elevates maternity to a symbol of purity and virtue in the context of the exotic world.

By bringing up their two children in this environment, the women encourage them to be virtuous, honest, and kind. Rather than spending time on tedious lessons, Paul and Virginie spend their time outdoors, surrounded by the unadulterated splendor of the island. They develop deep affection for the animals and plants, little lakes and pools, every landmark of their childhood. They even go so far as to give them names, as the



narrator relates: “Rien n’était plus agréable que les noms donnés à la plupart des retraites charmantes de ce labyrinthe. Ce rocher dont je viens de vous parler, d’où l’on me voyait venir de bien loin, s’appelait la Découverte de l’amitié” (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre 115). The two children have no concept of the complex world that lies beyond their home. The eighteenth-century sentimentalism to which Rousseau, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, and others subscribe informs us that men and women’s natural virtue can flourish only in such a completely natural state.

Despite the attractiveness of such a fantasy, the paradise that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre constructs is too good to be true. While the story begins during Paul’s and Virginie’s childhood, by the middle of the text, both have reached puberty. Virginie’s body begins to mature into womanhood: “Cependant depuis quelque temps Virginie se sentait agitée d’un mal inconnu. Ses beaux yeux bleus se marbraient de noir ; son teint jaunissait ; une langueur universelle abattait son corps” (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre 128). When Virginie discovers her female sexuality she becomes an obstacle to the family’s perfect harmony. The course of nature no longer provides a safe haven, but rather becomes a threatening force: “Elle songe à la nuit, à la solitude, et un feu dévorant la saisit. Aussitôt elle sort, effrayée de ces dangereux ombrages et de ces eaux plus brûlantes que les soleils de la zone torride” (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre 130). This force not only frightens Virginie but fills both of the mothers with alarm. The possibility of intercourse not sanctioned by marriage between the two children fills both mothers with fear: “Lorsque la nature lui aura parlé, en vain nous veillons sur eux, tout est à craindre” (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre 132). Rather than allowing the two children to marry and realize their love, Madame de la Tour and Marguerite conspire to send the poor girl away

to France. That the women must estrange her from her home in order to protect the sanctity of their society seems unnecessarily drastic. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre is constructing false obstacles in order to remove the disruptive power of Virginie's sexuality. Suddenly and almost inexplicably, nature's course becomes unacceptable when earlier in the story it was a welcome change from European restrictions.

While Bernardin de Saint-Pierre tries to re-create a new society that avoids the pitfalls of the old regime and women's power in the court, he fails. He is unsuccessful because ultimately he is just as anxious about female sexuality and power as other men of the *ancien régime*: that a woman could use "her sexual body to corrupt the body politic either through 'liaisons' or 'intimacies' with criminal politicians or through her ability to act sexually upon the king, his ministers, or his soldiers" (Hunt 95). This anxiety would carry on and influence the eventual Republicanism that followed the Revolution.

By the turn of the century, the Consulate, headed by Napoleon, was at work solidifying Rousseau's notion of family for the coming First Empire, including a father's inherent authority over his family:

The Code fulfilled revolutionary goals in creating unified law, establishing private property and freedom of contracts, cementing the end of feudalism and privilege, and codifying the secularization of marriage and the *état civil*. Some of its family laws grew out of the 1790s: notably, the Code maintained certain aspects of egalitarian inheritance for legitimate offspring and it allowed a much-curtailed version of divorce. But more often than not, the authors of the Code reacted against revolutionary innovations in family law. Above all, they reasserted the

patriarchal authority of fathers over children and husbands over wives, and attempted to secure the boundaries of legitimate families. (Desan 283-4)

The return to a patriarchal autocracy with the Empire in 1804, along with the renewed affirmation of a man's superior role in society, clinched an inescapable return to pre-Revolutionary dogma. Although the Revolution had not generally accepted women as active members of the movement, the fact that the female form had taken on the representation of liberty was not entirely without meaning. However faint this suggestion of political liberty, it disintegrated with the Napoleonic régime's reconsecration of paternal powers (Hunt 162). A paternal figure of power dominated public society, and the intimate society of family, as strongly as ever.

That Bernardin de Saint-Pierre does fully accept and integrate motherhood and sexual innocence into his narrative reveals his support of the progressive view for French society. On the other hand, his vision of a matriarchal society employs the constrictive female labels of a masculinist discourse and supporting traditionalist agendas. In fact, the author more or less conforms to the paternalistic family model by including a male neighbor character, "un homme déjà sur l'âge" (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre 92), who constantly watches over the women and children. The reader encounters this character at the very beginning of the story and he takes on the role of narrator throughout the text. The elderly narrator and even the families' two slaves seem to be as important to the upbringing of the children as their mothers, if not more so.

Not only does Bernardin de Saint-Pierre undercut the significance of his female order by inserting a man to tell the whole story, he also destabilizes his equal society. Despite the author's efforts to situate the novel in a world untouched by issues of class

such as those in France, the women still live in a class-based society. This we can see even from their names, one being “Madame” and the other simply going by her given name, Marguerite. Madame de la Tour also enjoys certain benefits due to her aristocratic background. This is most clear in the inequalities of land distribution between the two women:

J'en formais deux portions à peu près égales ; l'une renfermait la partie supérieure de cette enceinte, depuis ce piton de rocher couvert de nuages, d'où sort la source de la rivière des Lataniers, jusqu'à cette ouverture escarpée que vous voyez au haut de la montagne, et qu'on appelle l'Embrasure, parce qu'elle ressemble en effet à une embrasure de canon. Dans l'autre portion je compris toute la partie inférieure qui s'étend le long de la rivière des Lataniers jusqu'à l'ouverture où nous sommes, d'où cette rivière commence à couler entre deux collines jusqu'à la mer... La partie supérieure échet à madame de la Tour, et l'inférieure à Marguerite. (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre 95-6)

Bernardin de Saint-Pierre paints a vivid image of the differing levels of the two land plots, conjuring up memories of the *ancien régime* hierarchy. Yet, even without the author's description, the words *la partie inférieure* and *la partie supérieure* alone imply Madame de la Tour's class advantage over Marguerite.

Furthermore, the island paradise is not entirely what it seems. Despite his efforts to underline the pure nature that make the island so attractive, the author's descriptions drift off-course and fail to support his initial intentions. Lieve Spaas offers an alternative interpretation of the island in her study of Paul et Virginie:

We are far from a Garden of Eden; instead we are in a French colony where the occupants are social exiles who have fled from abandonment and European prejudices. Moreover, this paradise is marked by misery, infirmity, fear of old age, hard labour, and slavery. But, since this is to be paradise, all these calamities and hardships are accepted and endured with virtue, while the slaves are treated with kindness and humanity. The outcome is a blurred picture of the paradise-island with whatever idyllic quality the author evokes cancelled out by the images of oppression and poverty. (318)

This depiction of Ile de France is hardly alluring to a French public yearning to purify themselves. The rejection of Virginie's blossoming youth and the mothers' emphasis on their age and apparent impending death in particular present a picture that contradicts the image that Rousseau inspires, not to mention the fact that slavery is in full practice in this "paradise." Despite his idealistic intentions, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre constructs life on the island as ultimately unlivable. His choice of setting his family on a tropical island rather than in France does, however, present an immediate link with Alfred Mercier's text. What differentiates between these works is the authors' approach. Mercier was born and raised in Louisiana and had a deep personal investment in the land and the exotic lifestyle. While Bernardin de Saint-Pierre certainly spent a great deal of time on the island, he lacks the native's motivation to broadcast his own reality.

Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's island family is a classic in the canon of French fiction. Its popularity and durability are undeniable. More than that, the novel takes a traditional French model, the family, and refigures it to envision a new public in the future. Unfortunately, his emphasis on an idealized maternity and his fear of Virginie's

sexuality prevent him from offering a truly progressive image of society. While Bernardin de Saint-Pierre does attempt to offer an alternative to the social prison in Europe, he cannot escape it himself.

## FRENCH TRADITIONALISM ON THE CREOLE PLANTATION

Like Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's novel, L'habitation Saint-Ybars is the story of a family. This in itself is noteworthy. By choosing to focus on a whole family unit rather than on a distinct individual, the author opens a line of dialog between Louisiana and France. Mercier used much of his own life experience as inspiration for the plot as Auguste Viatte points out in his work on the history of Francophone literature: "dans ce tableau des plantations au temps de sa jeunesse, il ne force pas la note, et ses souvenirs personnels lui dictent des pages presque idylliques" (289). That he recounts his own experiences in this novel solidifies its self-proclaimed position of *récit social*. As in Paul et Virginie, the circumstances surrounding L'habitation Saint-Ybars are politicized, which further validates the text's significance as social commentary. Slavery, the American Civil War, immigration, and Anglo-American neo-colonization touch all aspects of life, and Mercier addresses every one. From the beginning of the novel, the highly political nature of the kind of plantation society on which Mercier bases his text, particularly in ante-bellum America, destines this novel to an influential role.

### The Exoticized Landscapes

The nature of the scenery that surrounds the Saint-Ybars plantation presents another parallel between Paul et Virginie and L'habitation Saint-Ybars. The Saint-Ybars family lives in a decidedly lush corner of Louisiana near the banks of the oft-romanticized Mississippi river.<sup>11</sup> Mercier's description of the flourishing landscape of

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<sup>11</sup> Chateaubriand's Atala offers one example of this: "Les deux rives du Meschacébé présentent le tableau le plus extraordinaire. Sur le bord occidental, des savanes se déroulent à perte de vue ; leurs flots de verdure, en s'éloignant, semblent monter dans l'azur du ciel, où ils s'évanouissent. On voit dans ces prairies sans bornes errer à l'aventure des troupeaux de trois ou quatre milles buffles sauvages. Quelquefois un bison chargé d'années, fendant les flots à la nage, se vient coucher, parmi de hautes herbes, dans une île du Meschacébé". See : Chateaubriand, Atala, René, Le Dernier Abencerage (Paris : Nelson, Editeurs, 1936) 48.

the plantation confirms this: “La façade, l’aile droite et l’aile gauche donnaient sur le jardin, où l’on voyait réunis les arbres indigènes les plus beaux et quantité de végétaux exotiques” (Mercier 32). While perhaps not among the most widely-used locales fiction writers adopt to emphasize other-worldliness, the mystery surrounding Louisiana landscapes nevertheless carries its own thrill.

As early as 1731, author L’Abbé Prévost used the Louisianian landscape as a backdrop in his dramatic novel Manon Lescaut. Seventy years later the legendary pre-Romantic author Chateaubriand himself situated his celebrated works Atala and René in a Louisianian setting. The difficulty with the authors of these novels, however, is a lack of knowledge concerning the realities of the locale, or their choice to ignore them. In fact, Prévost creates a vision of Louisiana as a prison colony when in actual fact the colony’s initial purpose was to recreate France as a perfect Catholic nation.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Chateaubriand’s novels lack, not only the spirit, but also a cultural relevance to Louisiana. The details he provides paint an incomplete picture of Louisiana despite his gift for the *imaginaire*. In fact, neither L’Abbé Prévost nor Chateaubriand was at all well acquainted with the landscape. L’Abbé Prévost never visited the New World and while Chateaubriand did travel across the Atlantic and published a vast two-volume work chronicling his adventure, modern scholars are skeptical of its validity: “Greatest among the literary exiles was Chateaubriand, over the authenticity of whose *Travels in America and Italy* a controversy has raged. His book is certainly a compound of borrowing from Bartram, Carver and Imlay” (Jones 151). That such incomplete and uninformed portraits

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<sup>12</sup> The Louisiana State Museum’s online exhibit of Louisianian history, The Cabildo, reveals that French royal policy even prohibited non-Catholics from settling, although this proved difficult to enforce due to the colony’s size. See: Louisiana State Museum. The Cabildo: Two Centuries of Louisiana History. March 10, 2008. < <http://lsm.crt.state.la.us/cabildo/cab3.htm>>



governed French awareness of Louisiana and its people adds to the poignancy of Mercier's innovative novel.

Creoles were not unaware of these misconceptions. Mercier's dear friend, poet Adrien Rouquette points out: "M. de Chateaubriand était un étranger ; son enfance s'était passée dans les bruyères de Combourg ; il n'admirait pas, il ne décrivait pas avec un cœur américain" (Rouquette 2). Mercier and his contemporaries did not write exclusively about French Louisiana. When they did, however, their attention to detail and specificity demonstrate what an intimate experience it was. It also serves as prime evidence of their devotion to representing their homeland. Although, as I've already mentioned, Mercier has a much deeper personal investment in Louisiana than Bernardin de Saint-Pierre in Ile de France, this exotic parallel is indisputable when we consider the Saint-Ybars alongside the island paradise in Paul et Virginie.

I have already touched on the importance of exotic landscapes to Paul and Virginie's tale and the fact that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's text hangs on the Enlightenment concept of the state of nature. While that author's ability to provide realistic descriptions of life on Ile de France is questionable, for the native Louisianian this is less of an issue. Alfred Mercier is born and bred a son of Louisiana. In fact, he spoke only Creole French until he was nearly eleven years old (Viatte 291). Yet, while being so familiar with the land and customs, he chooses to present L'habitation Saint-Ybars as a novel of the exotic. Mercier's revealing the inner realm of the plantation and family members' lives through the eyes of an outsider makes clear his self-exoticizing gesture. From the beginning with the arrival of a Frenchman in New Orleans, the entire novel can be seen as the uncovering of a heretofore hidden and romanticized society for

the French people. “Lorsque Pélasge était parti de Cadix pour la Louisiane, il savait bien qu’il n’allait pas dans un pays de sauvages... Cependant, bien qu’il sut qu’il était chez un peuple civilisé, il ne s’était pas attendu aux mœurs raffinées dont la fille de Saint-Ybars lui offrait un échantillon” (Mercier 29). Mercier reverses Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s inclination to obscure reality from the reader of Paul et Virginie. Rather, his is a reverse exoticism, shining a light on actuality rather than myth. Mercier clearly portrays the realities of nineteenth-century Louisiana and does not shield his readers from the more brutal truths about his homeland. He articulates frankly the condemnation suffered by the indigenous population as a result of rampant social injustice. Pélasge witnessed this as Démon took him on his first tour around the plantation: “Ils repassèrent devant le camp des Indiens. Les femmes étaient dans leurs cabanes faites de branches et de feuillage ; elles cousaient ; les hommes ivres de whisky et de tabac, étaient étendus dans l’herbe, le visage exposé au soleil et couvert de mouches” (Mercier 73). The portrait that Mercier paints of his homeland is all at once full of pride and criticism, an aspect that is absent from Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s world.

### **Feminine Roles**

This highly-charged exotic backdrop creates a compelling context in which to study how Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and Alfred Mercier present idealized female roles. Just as idealized visions of women affect how Bernardin de Saint-Pierre portrays his female characters in Paul et Virginie, a similar idealization is at work in Mercier’s female constructions. On a surface reading, the two women of the house, Mme. Saint-Ybars and Mamrie, carry out the functions of dutiful maternity while the daughters, Chant-d’Oisel and Blanchette, depict an idealized feminine virtue. In a male-dominated context, these

roles are the least threatening to the chain of power because they confine a woman to the private sphere. A look at one of Mercier's fellow Creole authors, Louis-Armand Garreau, provides a fascinating parallel with French eighteenth-century discourse. In his novel Louisiana, Garreau provides an interpretation of the Creole's distrust of female sexuality:

Nous y étions venus sous le nom français ; ce nom est glorieux ; nous l'aimions, et nous travaillions, autant qu'il était en nous, pour augmenter encore sa gloire et sa puissance. Un Roi, Louis XV, valet d'une courtisane, la Dubarry, nous délia de notre serment de fidélité envers la France, et nous vendit à l'Espagne... Nous ne voulions pas être Espagnols, et il ne nous restait plus qu'à être Louisianais. (116)

The French in France condemned the king's mistresses for corrupting his power, even circulating accusatory pamphlets (Hunt 90). Here we learn that the French Creoles in Louisiana shared this feeling. Mercier's Louisianian characters embody, yet again, the purity of motherhood and the innocence and virtue of feminine virginity, demonstrating the Creoles' inheritance of a fear of female power.

Mercier presents many instances of the perceived splendor and delight of motherhood and of maternal bonds in his novel. Mme Saint-Ybars and Mamrie embody examples of his vision of motherhood. After giving birth to twins, Mme Saint-Ybars is unable to nurse her children: "Une nuit, malgré tout son courage, elle ne put supporter l'atroce torture qu'elle éprouvait toutes les fois qu'elle voulait apaiser la soif des enfants" (Mercier 47). The pain of her breasts prevents her from her motherly duties and so, in desperation for her children, she turns to her servant, Mamrie. Having recently lost her

own new-born child, Mamrie is more than ready to help. Even her dreams predispose her to nurse:

Elle finit par s'assoupir. Le laisser-aller du sommeil lui fit prendre une attitude si penchée, que l'extrémité de son sein droit se trouva en contact avec les lèvres du petit garçon. Mamrie rêvait ; elle se voyait dans le jardin, assise au pied d'un arbre... et elle goûtait cette sainte et douce sensation qu'éprouve une mère qui allaite son enfant. (Mercier 48)

The young woman instantly bonds with the children and her bliss in nursing conquers the deep sadness at having lost her own baby. This action is reminiscent of the delight that Madame de la Tour and Marguerite take in breastfeeding and confirms her role as a mother.

The importance that Mercier places on woman's so-called natural maternity becomes more pronounced as the characters develop. Relatively early in the novel, tensions between husband and wife become quite pronounced. M. Saint-Ybars pursues his daughter's governess with such openness that one can only assume he has had some previous experience with such affairs. The plantation's inhabitants generally accept the husband's openly angry frustration with his wife, choosing to avoid any involvement in the awkward situation. Oddly, Mme Saint-Ybars does as well. In the scene just before his fight with Démon, M. Saint-Ybars openly ridicules and verbally abuses his wife at the dinner table in front of a large assembly of their household. His wife's reaction is one of quiet meekness:

Mme Saint-Ybars était inquiète et gênée; elle servait mal. Son mari lui reprocha sa maladresse en termes amers et sarcastiques...Mme Saint-Ybars, en passant une

assiettée de court-bouillon, en laissa tomber sur la nappe. Son mari la railla dans un langage, qui, dur au début, devint progressivement grossier et même injurieux. Elle fit un mouvement pour se retirer ; mais, se ravisant, elle reprit sa place et se tut. (Mercier 105)

Mercier never resolves the situation between the couple. After Démon and Mlle Nogolka depart from the household, the author focuses on other episodes. Not until the second half of the story do we learn that M. Saint-Ybars dies fighting in the Civil War and that post-war circumstances reduce Mme Saint-Ybars to living in a cabin at the back of what is left of the plantation. Later in the text, the consequences firmly manifest themselves in Mme Saint-Ybars' body. She wastes away into the utter remains of a person, almost zombie-like: "Quand on adressait des questions à Mme Saint-Ybars, elle ne répondait que par monosyllabes... [Elle] ressemblait à une morte qui n'a pas trouvé la paix dans le tombeau, et qui la demande" (Mercier 187). By failing to realize her ultimate duty as a mother, to nurse and nurture her own children, Mme Saint-Ybars fails in womanhood. Hopeless, she has no choice but to wither quietly away.

Mamrie, on the other hand, is lively and vivacious throughout the text. Despite aging considerably, she maintains her wit and personality until she dies. Her last moments, in fact, are spent seeking vengeance on her beloved nursling. In a violent act, Mamrie kills the man who murdered Démon: "elle profita de ce moment, pour plonger son couteau dans sa poitrine en s'écriant: 'Cé pa la peine to résisté, célera; fo to mourir'" (Ce n'est pas la peine de résister scélérat ; il faut que tu meures) (Mercier 251). Having fulfilled her maternal responsibility, she achieves an honored position in the version of patriarchal society that Mercier depicts for Louisiana. This comes as no surprise given

her name, Mamrie, and its resonance with the word, mammary. We can also link Mamrie's maternal success to her exotic quality. The natural setting on Ile de France intensified Madame de la Tour's and Marguerite's experience of motherhood and the same would appear to be true in Louisiana. Mamrie is an African-American woman and although she is capable of speaking perfect French, in her dialog she always speaks Creole. In essence, she speaks the language of the "other" woman. Not only is she other in the sense of being a woman from Louisiana, her physical appearance and her verbal expression also set her apart. Her differences in this exotic context invokes Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's implication of the maternal experience as Rousseau and Montesquieu visualized it. Here, we can read her body as the exotic maternal intensifier.

One of these women is a Creole, of European heritage, the other is descended from African slaves: "Elle était née des parents nés eux-mêmes sur l'habitation. Son grand-père et sa grand-mère, importés du pays des Bambaras, vivaient encore ; ils prétendaient avoir été roi et reine en Afrique" (47). We can read that fact that Mme Saint-Ybars fails at being a mother while the woman of a proud African heritage succeeds as a political comment on Mercier's part. While their biological mother is unable to care for them, Démon and Chant-d'Oisel find a second mother in Mamrie. If France would no longer maintain Louisiana as its own land and the settlers as French citizens, they could find an alternative.

Mercier seizes likewise on the idea of a woman's inherent innocence. Echoing Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Virginie*, he presents the two daughter-figures of the household, Chant-d'Oisel and Blanchette, as veritable symbols of modesty and fragility.

Blanchette grows up into a beautiful and kind young woman. Thanks in part to Pélasge and Chant-d'Oisel's guidance, "Blanchette avait un caractère enjoué, une intelligence facile, un coeur tender et aimant" (161). Despite these distinguishing qualities, however, they seem to lose their significance in the larger picture Mercier draws. Although the author describes her as an intelligent and rational young girl, he counterbalances this strength of mind by making her an embodiment of female weakness:

Sous sa peau blanche et rosée on voyait, pour ainsi dire, circuler la vie dans ses petites veines aux sinuosités gracieuses. Quoi qu'elle se portât bien, sa constitution était d'une délicatesse extrême. Le climat de la Louisiane était trop chaud pour elle; elle ressemblait à une de ces plantes frêles et diaphanes qui croissent dans l'ombre des vallons du Nord, et qu'un rayon de soleil accable.

(Mercier 161)

Ultimately, her frailty overpowers her strong mental abilities. By allowing her to have "une intelligence facile" at first, Mercier gives the reader a sense of his goal of warding off idealized images of women. Yet, he nullifies those efforts by imbuing her with such frailty. Through Blanchette, Mercier essentially renders the possibilities of the female social role to be as potent as a dying plant.

As for Chant-d'Oisel, her selfless priorities are what overwhelmingly underscore her modest virtue. The entire family endures much hardship following the Civil War. Naturally, these complications take their toll on the health and happiness of all, but on Chant-d'Oisel's in particular. For Mercier, she provides an opportunity for one of his female characters to carry out responsibility that validates her femininity: "[L]e chagrin, les privations, des travaux trop forts pour une jeune fille habituée aux douceurs de la

luxe, avaient compromis la santé de Chant-d'Oisel. Depuis plusieurs mois, elle toussait et maigrissait; malgré ses efforts pour paraître gaie" (Mercier 173). Like Blanchette, Chant-d'Oisel's female body is not capable of handling the realities of a life outside the comforts that a grand mansion offers. Yet, her inherent reserve prevents her from complaining or even showing her suffering at all. As seen in her mother's restraint in the episode over the tipped soup bowl and Blanchette's strength of character, oddly disproportionate to her physical strength, Chant-d'Oisel's power is internal. The female mind is clearly a vividly alive and energetic mechanism. Even so, physical weakness overrides any possibility of participation in the world outside the inner realm of the plantation in which these young women live. Mercier clearly designates Louisiana as a male space. The harsh climate and the untamed world that still surrounds the plantation quash the opportunity for female power when it is contained in such fragile bodies.

Both daughter figures echo the subdued virtue and modesty of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's Virginie. Their delicate natures faced with Louisiana's brutal climate are another instance of women becoming a definitive symbol of purity and virtue in an exotic context. More importantly, this weakness quashes any possible threat they might have endangered men's authority in their family or even in the larger society. Utter necessity condemns both Chant-d'Oisel and Blanchette to remain in the domestic sphere, simply to survive. Consequently, any dreams they might have had of producing change in Louisiana's society seem unlikely to take shape. In fact, by projecting the female role as so absurdly frail, the author nearly diminishes the authority of his own perspective as a Louisianian.



## MERCIER'S ORIGINAL VISION

This study's main thrust so far has been declaring that French paternalistic legislation strongly influenced Louisiana civil law and society in the nineteenth century. In demonstrating the corresponding facets of French and Louisianian administration, we also see how Mercier creates parallels between the functioning and organization of the Saint-Ybars family and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's conception of island life for his family of four in Paul et Virginie. Part of the initial argument, however, is that this political reiteration provided Alfred Mercier with a strong motivation to write his novel L'habitation Saint-Ybars. At this point, to turn away from the texts' similarities in construction, let us examine Mercier's divergence from tradition and speculate on the various motivations that may be in play. He seemed to accept the norms of the French civil code by focusing on a paternalistic family and assigned idealized gender roles to his characters on the Saint-Ybars plantation. Ultimately, however, Mercier had an original vision of social equality, in terms of slavery and the sexes, and even nationality.

From beginning to end, Mercier paints a singular picture of the daughter character Chant-d'Oisel. She demonstrates in her every deed a keen sense of perception and deep-rooted kindness. No matter how involved she is, Chant-d'Oisel is an image of compassion and acts as a defender in every situation. In fact, in the reader's first meeting with her in the slave emporium, she is already establishing her particular voice. She senses danger in the manners of another buyer towards the slave girl Titia and acts quickly to protect her:

La fille de Saint-Ybars...n'avait pas besoin qu'on lui mit, comme on dit vulgairement, les points sur les *i*; elle comprit la détresse de l'esclave, et se sentit

prise de compassion. Revenue près de son père, elle lui dit en lui montrant la jeune femme : ‘Papa, achète-la pour moi ; elle est bonne coiffeuse, bonne couturière’. (Mercier 17)

The daughter convinces her father to bring the woman home with the idea to have her serve as a nurse and hairdresser in the household. Despite his reluctance to consent, in the end, Chant-d’Oisel succeeds. Later in the story we learn that as a young girl, despite having the same *nourrice* as her twin brother Démon, Chant-d’Oisel never reached the same level of lasting intimacy with the woman as her brother did. This, in particular, provides a solid indication of her self-determination and independence and is quite uncharacteristic of the typical female identities throughout his text. In fact, this rejection of an intimate maternal bond provides resounding parallel with the settlers in Louisiana. It serves to link the mother/child separation with that between motherland and colony.

Above and beyond these facets of Chant-d’Oisel’s character which could easily go unnoticed by the casual reader, there is a moment in the text that stands out. After Démon’s tempestuous departure from Louisiana, the family begins to recover. Not only has a rapid succession of violent events finally subsided, but also, with the son of the house no longer present, the attentions of both the reader and the family are allowed to turn to the daughter. With the spotlight now on Chant-d’Oisel, Mercier lets her open up and display her own self. In a surprising turn, the girl who has remained barely noticeable since her first appearance presents an impressive stance. The burgeoning humanitarian the early scene in New Orleans foreshadows reappears as an abolitionist of sturdy convictions.

Elle était ouvertement opposée à l'institution de l'esclavage; par convenance elle n'en parlait pas devant les domestiques, mais au salon elle prenait son franc-parler. Elle ne quittait jamais le terrain des principes ; ce n'étaient pas des opinions qu'elle avait mais des convictions ; si elle avait fléchi devant des considérations d'intérêt, elle eut commis, au tribunal de sa conscience, un acte de lâcheté et de trahison envers la cause de la vérité et de la justice. (Mercier 159-60)

She voices the same radical opinions that a public in nineteenth-century Louisiana could condemn even a man for expressing. Furthermore, what would equally surprise a nineteenth-century public were the subject a man, *Chant-d'Oisel* focuses on action and not merely on futile grumbling: "Eh bien ! je ne pleurerai plus, disait-elle; c'est honteux; je parlerai, j'agirai. J'ai le droit de dire ce que je pense. On peut me lyncher, ça m'est égal ; je ne tiens pas à la vie, s'il faut, pour la garder, se condamner à un silence que reprouve ma conscience " (Mercier 160). In contrast with Blanchette's idealized meekness, this superb proclamation hardly seems in tune with Mercier's other depictions of female characters.

As a public figure in the nineteenth-century Louisiana, Mercier was well-known for his political tendencies in writing. Having already written a pamphlet in 1863 on the importance of a transatlantic alliance with France to aid a Southern victory in the Civil War, he had clearly outlined his support for the protection of his heritage. By the 1880s, however, his view had changed. "Perhaps in his scale of values it was more important to keep his homeland French than to free the slaves. But certainly when *Saint-Ybars* appeared eighteen years later, he had made up his mind: slavery was an evil" (Reinecke

161). However he arrived at his conclusion, the fact that Mercier chooses Chant-d'Oisel to convey this attitude is significant. A girl whom he otherwise portrays as too weak to even survive till the end of the novel voices a resounding statement of courage that surpasses even her own cause. Her spirit goes beyond the boundaries of public decorum to reveal a figure of integrity and honesty. Chant-d'Oisel rejected Mamrie's maternal protection and chose instead to rely only on herself, just as Creoles had ultimately rejected further French involvement in Louisiana, whether they could actually prevent it or not. The visible link between Mercier's maternal figures and France becomes even more pronounced here as Chant-d'Oisel herself becomes a vibrant representation of the Creole group. The fact that she does not survive, however, is symbolic of Mercier's view of the future of Creole Louisiana.

Mercier had studied French law for the majority of his time as a student in Paris and was intimately acquainted with the particulars of the civil code. We can state with confidence, then, that Mercier had a clear understanding of the restrictive role these laws placed on women and that his use of Chant-d'Oisel in such an allegorical way is certainly intentional. As a matter of fact, according to Réginald Hamel's 1982 introduction to L'habitation Saint-Ybars, the young man's disdain for the Napoleonic civil code increased during the time he studied: "D'ailleurs, avouera-t-il plus tard, les dédales des lois napoléoniennes l'ennuyaient éperdument" (Hamel 9). His readership knew him as a strong-minded champion, ready to battle for any cause he deemed worthy from his previous writings. His 1881 novel is no different. He not only demonstrates a rejection of the idealized female roles typified by novels such as Paul et Virginie, but by using a female rather than a male character, Mercier also cements his perception of French

Creoles as the other. He was clearly aware that women had played other to the masculine self throughout history in the French social context. The author shows how that role resonates strongly with the traditional colonialist perception of Louisiana French Creoles. At the same time, he counterbalances it with Chant-d'Oisel's eloquence.

Here, Mercier adapts an all too familiar role, that of the other, to match his own experience, offering a unique manifestation of a long-subordinated voice. This novel functions as a vehicle for the Creoles to put forth his personal experience, as do many other French-language texts from Louisiana. If we keep in mind Louisiana's colonial history, it becomes more logical to approach an analysis of this expression in terms of its postcoloniality. We can now see the plantation from the point of view of one victim of its traditionalism, this young woman, Chant-d'Oisel. Simultaneously, Mercier opens up his Francophone society, revealing the Creole as a sort of victim. Just as Virginie's family forces her away from home to protect their society from the contamination of her sexual body, France rejected and abandoned its former citizens in Louisiana. While French diplomacy claimed that this was purely a political move, the colonists themselves offer a different interpretation (Fortier 1: 141-176) The tensions, beginning with France denying Louisiana settlers their patriotism and forced adoption of Spanish rule, continue on as a dialog between social realities and fantasies of the exotic. Adrien Rouquette's assertion concerning authorship on Louisiana makes this sense of othering more evident and further expresses the Creole's displacement. Rouquette leads us to believe that European misrepresentations of Louisiana play a major part in the Creole experience. In terms of L'habitation Saint-Ybars, the social and political tensions culminate in a narrative that at once declares a distinct French Creole identity and foretells its demise.

## NORTH AMERICAN POSTCOLONIALITY

In his fascinating article “American Literary Emergence as a Postcolonial Phenomenon”, Lawrence Buell offers an exciting new perspective of the works of Herman Melville, Washington Irving, and Henry Thoreau. Buell states that “Americanists do not usually read American Renaissance texts as if the implied reader were other than American; yet on reflection we know that is nonsense: American writers keenly desired to be read abroad” (147). According to his study, these English-language authors maintained an active relationship with their readers in England. Melville and other authors edited texts with this specific audience in mind and even directly addressed the non-American reader in the text itself. These careful attentions also surround Francophone American authors’ publications. Alfred Mercier received his education in France and maintained relationships with writers there. Moreover, Mercier initially published many of his first works in France. Most striking of all, however, is the fact that L’habitation Saint-Ybars presents Louisiana to the European audience through the eyes of a Frenchman, Pélasge.

Buell singles out six different marks of the presence of postcolonialism in English-language American writing: The semi-Americanization of the English language, cultural hybridization, the expectation that artists be responsible agents for achieving national liberation, confronting neocolonialism, the problem of alien genres, and the New-World pastoral (149-52). These can no doubt be translated into equally powerful tools with which to consider American authorship in French. Here, in terms of Mercier’s text, we will concentrate our focus on the creolization of the French language and cultural hybridity.

The concept of a national language is truly an important one when understanding and appreciating a postcolonial text. The authenticity of the author's expression is put in jeopardy by writing in the language of the subjugating culture. Through the process of creolization, in Louisiana, the Americanization of the French language, Louisianians gain their own voice and the ability to put their independence from French culture into words. Louisiana Creole is an othered French. Mercier demonstrates this most vividly in L'habitation Saint-Ybars. Creole language and its role in forming a Louisianian identity take a place front and center, particularly as concerns the young character of Démon. In the novel, both Démon and Chant-d'Oisel speak Creole with Mamrie. The author writes out long sections of dialog entirely in Creole French. While contemporary editions of the book include translations of the Creole dialog into standard French, when it first appeared, these sections had no explanation at all. The French reader would feel as though he or she were reading a foreign language. Mercier thus incorporates a sense of foreignness into his text. When Démon is studying in Paris he writes to Mamrie in Creole, attracting the interest of his Parisian host family, the Garniers:

Il écrivait à Mamrie en créole ; elle lui répondait de la même manière. Les lettres de Mamrie faisaient l'admiration de M. et de Mme. Garnier ; ils les montraient aux amis de la famille, Démon les traduisait. M. Garnier en fit publier plusieurs dans un journal de philologie, avec des commentaires sur la langue créole par Pélasge. (Mercier 146)

There is no doubt that in presenting these letters to a French audience, the cultural lines between French and non-French identities become more distinct. Mercier others Louisiana's Creole by showing that a Frenchman could not easily understand the

language. It is, indeed, something other than French, despite any role the culture initially played. Yet, this way of speaking is not something of which Louisianians are ashamed. On the contrary, this language is a reflection of the unique construct of their identity.

The 2007 edition of the Columbia University encyclopedia defines a Creole language as “any language that began as a pidgin but was later adopted as the mother tongue by a people in place of the original mother tongue or tongues” (12286). Mercier’s characters surely demonstrate this adoption that cements Creole into Louisiana’s culture. Interestingly, Mercier occasionally uses the term *patois* to refer to Louisiana’s Creole language. His use of this word adds an unexpected kink in our understanding of the language as it usually denotes a substandard position, however, his association of it with his childhood most likely accounts for this.

Mercier grew up speaking Creole French and makes note of how widespread the practice was for young people, primarily second generation Louisianians, in his essay on the creolization of the French language in the region. “Tous les petits blancs d’origine français, en Louisiane, ont parlé ce patois concurremment avec le français” (*Etude 2*). What is particularly interesting in this context is Mercier’s specification of “en Louisiane”. This process of creolization did not take place in all of France’s colonial holdings, and even where it did, the resulting languages were radically different. The distinct Louisianian language is indicative of a unique Louisianian identity. Mercier is sharing a part of his personal past by composing so much of this work in Creole. Looking at this in terms of Wittgenstein’s statement in his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein), Mercier is validating the existence of a unique Creole culture at the same time.



This Louisianian language certainly serves as a testimonial to the powerful hybridity of culture in Louisiana. Yet the language is not our only evidence, as Mercier obviously demonstrates with the wide variety of characters he includes in his story. French political refugees, Native Americans, Russians, Irishmen, French Creoles, Anglo-Americans, African slaves, Spaniards, and people of mixed race all take their places in this novel. Even more amazing is that nearly all of these different people live together on the same plantation in an extended family. Unlike on Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's island, the author does not focus solely on the characters of French origin. While the fact that social stigmas regimented different people into different roles is undeniable, neither is the influence these groups had on each other. The multilingual, multi-ethnic micro society that Mercier unveils showcases the diversity in nineteenth-century Louisiana. People from all over the world came to leave their distinct imprint on society. What resulted was a *gumbo* culture, unlike anywhere else.

In the late nineteenth century, the Vicomte Paul D'Abzac served as the French consul in New Orleans. Following the 1881 publication of L'habitation Saint-Ybars, D'Abzac wrote a twenty page review and critique which he most likely intended for a French audience.<sup>13</sup> Not merely focusing on the novel in terms of literature, he included a good deal of commentary on the cultural development of the French colonists: "Les créoles de la Louisiane sont des français modifiés, au physique et au moral, par le climat, par le contact des anglo-saxons et surtout par l'institution de l'esclavage. Il est intéressant de savoir ce que sont devenus, sous cette triple action, les hommes de notre race" (D'Abzac 1). D'Abzac's reaction to L'habitation Saint-Ybars demonstrates Mercier's

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<sup>13</sup> We can assume that D'Abzac is writing to a French audience due to his extensive use of the *nous* form when referring to his own, European perspective.

success in clearly delineating a distinctive Louisianian identity by exposing the multitudes of different people living in Louisiana.

In our examination of postcoloniality in L’habitation Saint-Ybars, the inclusion of Homi Bhabha’s theory of mimicry opens up an entirely new vision of Mercier’s text. In The Location of Culture, Bhabha posits that by copying the colonizing culture, the colonized learns to wield a threatening weapon: “The *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (Bhabha 126). As Bhabha unveils in his writings, a colonized culture exists in a realm of constant subjugation. While the work that colonized writers produce may seem to be imitating the writing of the subjugating culture, the subtle mockery of writing that mimics the colonizing culture constitutes an attack against colonial superiority. Mercier uses L’habitation Saint-Ybars as an attack against both the seeming superiority of French culture and the rising domination of Anglo-Americans by demonstrating the existence of a well-established Creole culture.

## **BECOMING LOUISIANAIS**

There is no question that Alfred Mercier read Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. Edward Laroque Tinker made clear Mercier's enjoyment of the Frenchman's texts (351) as did the author himself in his 1842 poem, *Patrie*: "Je me souviens de la grande harmonie / Des flots du lac qui baignaient mes pieds nus; / Là je lisais Paul et sa Virginie, / On souriait à mes pleurs ingénues" (lines 29-32). We have seen how, upon establishing links between French and Louisianian social constructs, a clear resemblance between the two emerge. As the similar presentations of female characters in Paul et Virginie and L'habitation Saint-Ybars suggest, each regime prescribes idealized gender roles. The parallels between Madame de la Tour's and Marguerite's maternal joys and exemplary moral standards and those of Mamrie underscore the closeness between Louisianian legislators and those in France. Furthermore, the emphasis on inner virtue and morality for Blanchette and Chant-d'Oisel and for Virginie also correspond in terms of social models of the projected masculinist order.

The importance of the family unit in Mercier's novel serves as yet another testimony to Louisianian assimilation of French ideologies. Although the Civil War and slavery, both relevant issues for Louisiana in terms of its status as a U.S. state, appear to dominate the narrative, the emphasis on the family unit's solidarity reveals another *souvenir* of *La Patrie* in Creole identity. If we examine how Chant-d'Oisel's personality functions in terms of Mercier's familial solidarity as well as the paternalistic gender constructs, her key status doubles in importance. We can read Chant-d'Oisel not as simply representing Mercier's rejection of French traditionalism, but as a heroine of

Creole Louisiana.<sup>14</sup> French heroines like Virginie and figures such as La Liberté are mired in paternalistic doctrines. In fact, the process of their creation resonates deeply with Edward Saïd's concept of Orientalism, that is, European intellectuals' construction of an imaginary world that did not actually exist in the Orient. By structuring the Orient themselves, according to Saïd, European imperialists were able to assert their authority in the region. French philosophers of the Revolution likewise romanticized the female sphere in a move to dominate it and separate it from that of the men.

Across the Atlantic, this distinction or "othering" becomes quite relevant in calculating the span of European imperialism and in assessing the dynamics of international relations in terms of power, trade, and political maneuvering. Louisiana's key ports and crucial geographical location render it equally susceptible to such a romanticization. This sort of "occidentalism" functions similarly to Saïd's Orientalism. Here, however, European scholars look towards an imaginary space in the Americas and the Caribbean. Chant-d'Oisel's individuality interrupts this process. Her voice is an integral part of Mercier's hope of moving Louisiana forward.

When we reflect on the history of what we consider to be Louisiana, the power of the remaining strands of French influence becomes even more significant. It is important to recall that from 1762 on, the colony was under Spanish rule and that by 1768 Spanish officials started to enforce their laws. Needless to say, French-speaking *Louisianais* had been under the impression that they formed an extension of their native France across the Atlantic. This change produced a full spectrum of reactions, the dominant being a sound

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<sup>14</sup> We can consider Chant-d'Oisel as a Creole counterpart to the Acadian character, Evangeline, from Longfellow's work of the same name. Evangeline, however, has maintained a strong popularity over the years, while Chant-d'Oisel remains a more obscure figure. This is interesting to note, especially in terms of neo-colonialism in Louisiana following the 1803 Louisiana Purchase.

refusal. In fact, for the French-speaking population of eighteenth-century Louisiana, this rejection of Spanish domination served as a defining moment in the development of Creole identity.

Throughout Spanish rule over Louisiana, beginning after the Treaty of Fontainebleau in 1762, the majority of Creoles never fully accepted or adopted the Spanish agenda. Indeed, in 1768, a large group from the Francophone community staged a violent uprising against the incoming regime headed by Governor Antonio de Ulloa of Seville (Fortier 1:206-30). Many of these dissenters were imprisoned or killed as a result of the fray that Alcée Fortier describes as being “animated by the spirit of the old D’Arensbourg: [the colonists] wished to defend liberty, and would not submit to a foreign yoke” (1:207). That same year, in another attempt to repel a Spanish incursion, the ex-French subjects in Louisiana appealed to their king, imploring him to take them back. He did not grant their wish, as history tells us.

Although neither their rebellion nor their entreaties to the French king were successful, French Louisianians nevertheless refused to abandon the system which was familiar to them. Their decisions regarding the 1808 *Digest of Civil Law* serve as evidence of this. For French colonists in the New World, France’s betrayal forcibly altered their entire perspective. Louisianian historian Charles Gayarré describes the general frame of mind:

As Frenchmen, they felt that a deep wound had been inflicted on their pride by the severing in twain of Louisiana, and the distribution of its mutilated parts between England and Spain. As men, they felt the degradation of being bartered away as marketable objects; they felt the loss of their national character and rights, and the

humiliation of their sudden transformation into Spaniards or Englishmen without their consent. As colonists, as property owners, as members of a civilized society, they were agitated by all the apprehensions consequent upon a change of laws, manners, customs, habits and government. (113)

That French Creoles clung to familiar French traditions throughout the period of Spanish rule signals the development of their singular identity. The news that their home would cease to be French and that they were to become Spaniards and reside under Spanish rule, shocked Louisiana's residents. As the impassioned and violent reactions prove, the settlers believed that they had been living in an extension of their French homeland, under the same regime as their compatriots in Europe. This rejection recalls how Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's island family forced Virginie into an exile from her home. Just as she begins to mature into womanhood she is ripped out of the island's nurturing environment and, without any prior knowledge of the place, travels to France. Creoles are left stranded without the support of their motherland and must face an influx of new faces and a foreign language.

Since the beginnings of France's colonizing of the territory, it had been completely clear that whether one resided in France or its colonies, the king considered all inhabitants of France's dominions his direct subjects. Once again, Gayarré provides a detailed report:

Frenchmen, removing to Louisiana, were to preserve their national character, and their children, born there, were to be considered as the natural born subjects of the king. The same privilege was granted to the children of all other European settlers

in Louisiana, provided they professed the Roman Catholic religion. (Gayarré 203-4)

To suddenly be without a country or a king was already a harsh blow, but the denial of a national identity, effected by the motherland itself, served as a powerful catalyst for the settlers. Mercier's registers his personal reaction in his poem, *Patrie*: "Ils sont bien doux, mais qu'ils sont éphémères, / Les fruits qu'on goûte au foyer paternel! / Ravis, enfants, à l'aile de nos mères, / Sous d'autres cieux nous pleurons notre ciel" (lines 37-40).

Creoles suffered deep injuries to both their pride and confidence from what they perceived to be a forced exile by their fellow Frenchmen. While the residents of Louisiana had no wish to become Spanish subjects, as a result of this rejection by France, they no longer felt any allegiance to the French crown.

Once themselves colonizers of American land, Louisianians became the colonized as Spanish officials and Spanish government invaded their space. Again, this exile from home recalls Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Virginie*. The young girl's family forced her away from home into a foreign exile in order to preserve the best interests of the family. Likewise, French officials rejected their land holdings in Louisiana and denied recognition of citizenship to the settlers in order to protect the last vestiges of France's colonial empire in the Seven Years' War. For Creoles in Louisiana, being rejected by those whom they would have considered to be their equals completely reorders perceptions of rank and status. French colonists' identity becomes subaltern. They do not, however, set responsibility wholly on the Spanish. To them, the greater outrage was abandonment by their homeland, *La Patrie*.

In this patriarchal and culturally unstable environment, the only possibility for a redemption of Louisiana and its inhabitants was the creation of a republic in Louisiana and a new identity, neither French nor Spanish, but *Louisianais*. We can credit the retention of French law to the Creoles' refusal to accept a foreign authority, which they demonstrated more aggressively in the Revolution of 1768. Louisianians voiced both a declaration of independence to Spanish invaders and a sharp rebuff to French bureaucrats by refusing to let go of their colony's foundational law. Their vision of independence, as well as the settlers' push for an individual identity, subsequently manifested themselves in the various texts that Creole society produced, predominantly in the nineteenth century. Alfred Mercier's L'habitation Saint-Ybars is a prime example.

The drafters of the 1808 *Digest of Civil Law* transposed French social structure into the Louisiana setting, adapting and forming it to fit the environment. Mercier does the same with Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's exotic family. Rather than simply borrowing from Paul et Virginie, with L'habitation Saint-Ybars Alfred Mercier uses the classic text as a tool, making a definitive case for his own unique identity and establishing his own voice. In this southern plantation idyll, the author both asserts his Creole identity and attacks European misconceptions about their American counterparts in order to nullify French supremacy once and for all.



## CONCLUSION

The portrait that L'habitation Saint-Ybars presents of the Creole is symptomatic of the trials and tribulations this group has faced throughout its history. Since Louisiana's beginnings as part of New France, the French have distanced their Creole compatriots. The physical separation of the Atlantic Ocean first isolated the colonists from their homeland and the linguistic barrier resulting from the Anglo-American influx after the Louisiana Purchase followed. Benjamin Latrobe's 1819 observations of the city of New Orleans confirm that the post-1803 influx of Americans deliberately overpowered the long-standing Creole way of life: "Americans are pouring in daily, not in families, but in large bodies. In a few years therefore, [New Orleans] will be an American town. What is good and bad in the French manners, & opinions must give way, & the American notions of right & wrong, of convenience & inconvenience will take their place" (Latrobe 35). Writers such as Voltaire and L'Abbé Prévost demonstrated that the French had defined *Louisianais* as other since the eighteenth century. A hundred years later, Anglo-Americans were treating their Creole compatriots in the same way.

Mercier's text aims to reverse this trend. By the late nineteenth century, French Creole culture was dwindling at an alarming rate. Educated Francophones saw their culture threatened with annihilation and scrambled in an effort to save it. Mercier was one of those working to perpetuate this heritage. L'habitation Saint-Ybars is only one of the results of his valiant efforts but what makes this work stand out among all others is the author's brilliant manipulation of gender roles that facilitates his argument. That his characters relate to such idealized roles as those in Paul et Virginie demonstrates the lasting ties between the two states. Yet, his use of confining idealized visions of women

firmly establishes his interpretation of Creole victimization. He rejects their restrictions and instills the daughter figure with the strength and courage to speak her beliefs, an act to promote hope to his fellow Creoles. Chant-d'Oisel's death serves as a warning of the fate of Louisiana's Creoles if they do nothing.

The links between France's and Louisiana's masculinist social discourses are evidence that knowledge of a particular society's history is integral to an appreciation of how the group attempts to define itself. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's idyll seems no more than a tragic story if we read it without an understanding of the politicizing forces of the author's era. This is no less important for French Creole literature. In L'habitation Saint-Ybars, Mercier pulls his understanding of civil law and his knowledge of French literary genres together to signal the existence of a specific Creole identity. To be able to convey this message, however, the reader must also be familiar with the history of Louisiana. Without an awareness of how legislation in Louisiana affected a woman's role in and outside the home, Chant-d'Oisel's courage could hardly have the same impact on a readership. Perhaps most of all, Mercier's novel serves as a call to remember Louisiana's past.

That this story plays out in the post colony of Louisiana demonstrates the incredible size of the area that colonialism affected. A familiar conception of anti-colonial reaction for traditional scholars of postcolonialism would include Africa and the African Diaspora, India, and indigenous Americans. Texts such as Mercier's offer a new realm for literary critics to explore, that of the other "other", expanding the ranks of postcolonial authors. We cannot ignore the populations of Europeans implanted abroad during the colonial period and their ability to contribute to a dialog between the colonial

self and other. Too often, however, political events and social development overshadow these peoples' experiences. Even today, few studies exist on Louisianian Creoles, forcing modern scholars of Louisiana to use the same studies as their counterparts of more than fifty years ago. By reading authors like Alfred Mercier, Adrien Rouquette, Charles Dugué, and Louis-Armand Garreau, we acknowledge the existence of this void and the fact that it deserves attention.

In terms of its classification in literature, Mercier's work seems to offer two possibilities: French and Francophone or American. The fact that the author wrote in French would seem automatically to set this novel down as an important component of French and Francophone literatures. After an examination of the text, however, the sense that it is part of an American tradition gathers more weight. The family plantation, along with its varied population, is a construct unique to the New World. That it functions as a central image to the plot highlights the novel's place in Americana, while the gender-specific assignations that Mercier adopts from Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's island society furnish an essentially French element. This mixture of European and North American is further complicated when we consider French Creole writers' current ambivalent classification. Depending on the locale, Mercier's and his compatriot's writings rest on shelves in the same section as Francophone writers from Haiti and Guadeloupe or with authors from the American South such as William Faulkner.

Louisiana occupies a space that is in-between. Like the people who cultivated it, both French and American features characterize the expanse. While this cultural amalgamation has issued a remarkable collection of works, to make it accessible will require a more stable position in the literary world. The manifesto of March 16, 2007,

“Pour une littérature-monde en français”, published in the newspaper Le Monde calls for a new conception of writers from France and *La Francophonie* for this very reason:

Combien d’écrivains de langue française, pris eux aussi entre deux ou plusieurs cultures, se sont interrogés alors sur cette étrange disparité qui les reléguait sur les marges, eux ‘francophones’, variante exotique tout juste tolérée, tandis que les enfants de l’ex-empire britannique prenaient, en toute légitimité, possession des lettres anglaises ? (Barbery et al.)

Rather than assigning their works to a vague category apart from French writing, this manifesto calls for a worldwide view. Its authors posit that the conceiving of a world literature written in the French language will provide a solution. If we consider French-language writings from Louisiana only within their own context, their potential audience is greatly diminished. To promote works like L’habitation Saint-Ybars as a part of the panorama of world literature is to work towards strengthening their presence in literary contexts around the globe.

Alfred Mercier’s novel is only one of many Creole-authored texts of the nineteenth century. Mercier stands out among his peers, however, because of the direct link he forms with a story that for years dominated French culture, Paul et Virginie. His reading of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s society offers a clever transformation of Virginie into a representation of Creole Louisiana as Chant-d’Oisel, a creolization of traditional French work that showcases yet another result of writing an othered identity. There is no doubt that Alfred Mercier’s work has much to offer literary scholarship. This thesis should serve as a bid to bring more attention to Mercier’s work. Creole writings such as

L'habitation Saint-Ybars deserve our attention both inside and outside the context of Louisiana.

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## **APPENDIX A: THE WORKS OF ALFRED MERCIER**

La Rose de Smyrne et l'Ermitte du Niagara. Paris, 1842.

Biographie de Pierre Soulé. Paris, 1848.

La Fièvre Jaune. New Orleans, 1860.

Du Panlatinisme. Paris, 1863.

Le Fou de Palerme. New Orleans, 1873.

La Fille du Prêtre. New Orleans, 1877.

Etude sur la langue créole en Louisiane. 1880.

L'habitation Saint-Ybars. New Orleans, 1881.

Lidia. New Orleans, 1887.

*Fortunia.* New Orleans, 1888.

*Reditus et Ascalaphos.* New Orleans, 1890.

Johnelle. New Orleans, 1891.

## **APPENDIX B: SUMMARY OF L'HABITATION SAINT-YBARS**

The story begins in the French Quarter of New Orleans where M. Saint-Ybars, an upper-class owner of a prosperous plantation, has come on two errands: firstly, to purchase a new blacksmith and secondly, to find a new tutor for his young son, Démon. Bringing his adolescent daughter, Chant-d'Oisel, with him, M. Saint-Ybars visits the slave emporium to accomplish his first task. He easily finds a suitable blacksmith; however, Chant-d'Oisel comes upon a beautiful, pale-skinned slave girl who is on the cusp of being purchased by two men who are quite a deal less than confidence inspiring. She senses the danger that the situation implies for the slave and tells her father that she would like the girl as a birthday present. Although reluctant at first, M. Saint-Ybars agrees and ends up buying both the young woman, Titia, and her grandmother.

The year is 1851. Antony Pélasge, a young Frenchman who fought for the Republicans in the Revolution of 1848 and escaped exile in Algeria to Spain, has traveled to New Orleans and disembarks the very same day that M. Saint-Ybars is in town on his errands. Coincidentally, Pélasge happens to be looking for employment as a teacher. The two men's paths cross at the local newspaper editor's and quickly reach an agreement. Pélasge joins them as they head back to the plantation. For the rest of the novel, we learn about the Saint-Ybars through his eyes. as a graduate of the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, Pélasge is more than qualified for his new job as Démon's tutor, yet his easy demeanor and unconventional teaching style are what truly open unruly Démon up and propel him towards academic success.

The family mansion on the plantation is also home to Mme Saint-Ybars and Vieumaite ("Ole Massa"), M. Saint-Ybars' aging father. Mme Saint-Ybars is a quiet,

nervous lady, and her husband often abuses her verbally and physically. This is due in part to their failing relationship. M. Saint-Ybars is captivated by Mlle Nogolka, his daughter's Russian governess, despite her virtuous rejection of his frequent advances. Vieumaite is an elderly man and a scholar, even into his retirement. Despite his relative seclusion and solitary nature, it is general knowledge on the plantation that in earlier days he had relations with Semiramis, a free mulatto who manages the female slaves and that a child resulted from the liaison. Salvador, now grown up, works as the plantation carpenter and, unlike his overly impassioned legitimate half-brother, is cool and calm. Other essential members of the Saint-Ybars household are Mamrie, Mme Saint-Ybars' personal maid and the twins' wet-nurse, a personage of extreme compassion and devotion who maintains an extremely intimate bond with Démon, and Lauzon, M. Saint-Ybars' valet, who capitalizes on his elevated status as the first child of Saint-Ybars' eldest son, from an illegitimate union, to bolster his extravagant dreams and excessive luxuries, as well as his vicious troublemaking.

Pélasge and his new charge turn out to be kindred spirits. In his first few days on the plantation Démon gives his tutor the grand tour during which they develop a bond that lasts throughout the rest of their lives. Pélasge also meets Vieumaite for the first time and the two scholars are drawn to each other for companionship and discussion.

As the story progresses the relations between master and wife on the plantation worsen steadily. The author reveals the dire state of the situation when M. Saint-Ybars attempts to rape Mlle Nogolka late one evening under *Le Vieux Sachel*, an ancient tree that shelters the graves of his ancestors. Pélasge, who was returning from a late visit with Vieumaite, witnesses the scene and, although he does not intervene, she manages to

escape. The already ominous night turns stormy and Saint-Ybars is forced to delay his fierce passions. The storm serves as a precursor to the coming violence of the following days.

The next morning Mamrie discovers a baby left by the house, presumably the following night. With her light coloring, blue eyes and blond hair, the majority of the family is in awe of the tiny creature and determines to adopt her into their household. No one knows who she is or who left her. Neither could anyone imagine that, racially, she was anything other than white. In reality, the baby is Titia's child, the result of her affair with a former owner. She is illegitimate and part black. Although later on her identity poses a difficulty, for now she is an utterly joyful addition to the plantation. For M. Saint-Ybars, however, Blanchette, as Chant-d'Oisel names her, is no comfort after his thwarted overtures to Mlle Nogolka the evening before. When his wife accidentally tips over a bowl of soup at the dinner table, he mocks her and viciously insults her until Démon can take no more. He pounds his fists on the table and yells for his father to stop. This enrages Saint-Ybars who reaches for his whip, ordinarily used for enforcing the obedience of his slaves, and orders Démon to kneel and receive his punishment. When he refuses, a scuffle ensues and Mlle Nogolka is injured in the process of attempting to protect the boy. Seeing the object of his affection injured, Saint-Ybars' wrath spills over the edge. He takes the boy and beats him severely until Chant-d'Oisel is able to pull the whip away. When Mamrie hears her Démon's yells she comes running. She threatens her Master for having beaten the child she nurtured as an infant. When he does not stop she throws a hatchet at his head, stunning the entire family. Démon takes advantage of the situation to escape while Mamrie is locked away to await her sentence. The

outrageousness is far from over, however. A hurricane descends upon the area as a remorseful Saint-Ybars sends a search party out to look for his missing son. The group finds Démon stranded in the middle of a surging river. A dramatic rescue nearly drowns both father and son but the intensity of the situation helps to repair the rift between the two. As for Mamrie, although M. Saint-Ybars declares that she must receive a public flogging, Mlle Nogolka steps in, using her particular influence on the master, and begs a pardon for Mamrie which he grants, although with much difficulty.

Following this series of events Mlle Nogolka sees no alternative other than leaving the plantation. Pélasge also encourages Démon, whose pride has suffered a horrible blow on the plantation, to go to Paris to continue his schooling, and to recover. Before their separation, the two teachers confide in each other. Mlle Nogolka tells Pélasge of her secret love for him and Pélasge, unable to return her affections, reveals his love for Chant-d'Oisel. The two part on good terms.

We learn that Titia's secret, having left her baby by the mansion to be discovered and adopted by her master's family, was not kept as well as she would have hoped. Lauzun, the mischievous valet, learns everything after he attacks Titia's grandmother, Lagniappe. A deep-seated desire for the beautiful young woman possesses him but his affections are not returned. Using his new-found information, Lauzun threatens Titia with exposure unless she gives herself to him. Titia is unable to face such a vile decision and she drowns herself in the plantation well, leaving behind a note for Lauzun in which she threatens the most relentless of hauntings should he ever reveal Blanchette's past. The old master Vieumaite also dies at the end of the first section of the book. He leaves,

rather prophetically, his cabin to Pélasge and instructs him to use it as a safe-hold for the family in any time of disaster that should arise.

What follows is the very worst of disasters: the Civil War. Mercier does not give details of what happened on the plantation during the war but rather skips to the aftermath to focus on the effects and the difficulties of reconstruction. M. Saint-Ybars has died fighting and most of the former habitants of the plantation have scattered. Only Pélasge, Chant-d'Oisel, Blanchette, and the now mentally deteriorating Mme. Saint-Ybars along with Mamrie, freed but true to her family, remain. Démon remains in Paris throughout and is unaware of the drastic changes in his former home as well as of the privations his family faces in making sure he receives enough money to continue his studies.

The misfortunes and privations take their toll on Chant-d'Oisel and her health deteriorates rapidly. Although they had no real opportunity to develop their love or their relationship, Pélasge and Chant-d'Oisel are determined to realize their love. The two marry with Chant-d'Oisel on her death bed and she expires almost immediately after the ceremony is completed. Démon finally returns after her death. He no longer speaks in the Creole he used as a youth, straining his intimacy with Mamrie. He embraces his new education, however, and proclaims that the only way to create a rapprochement between free blacks and abolitionists in the North and old world plantation owners in the South is the thorough education of blacks. Ultimately, memories present the only barrier to integration and the creation of a strong alliance.

Now being at home for an extended period of time, Démon falls in love with Blanchette. After Lauzun maliciously reveals the secret of Blanchette's origin, Démon

enters a duel with a cantankerous local to protect his love's honor. Even though he triumphs in the duel, realizing the implausibility of their situation is a strong blow to Démon and Blanchette's love. Démon poisons himself, unable to cope with the seeming impossibility of their happiness. Blanchette, upon discovering her dying love, shoots herself with his pistol. When Mamrie learns of the tragedy she makes a vow of justice. She kills the underhanded Lauzun and commits suicide.

Only ruins remain of the Saint-Ybars family and their plantation. Pélasge, having nothing, decides to write to Mlle Nogolka. By now, she's married to an older philosopher and he welcomes Pélasge's coming. The Third Republic is dawning and the three determine to work for the betterment of humanity.

## **VITA**

Mary Florence Cashell is a native of Virginia and has been devoted to languages and literature her whole life. She began studying French and German at an early age and traveled throughout Europe. As an undergraduate student, she attended the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Upon taking several courses in United States history, and as a result of her experience with the French language, she developed a passionate interest in the Francophone history and culture of North America. This thesis is the result of that passion. Mary currently resides in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.