

**The Black Executioner:
The Intercolonial Interactions of a Martinican Slave in Quebec,
1733-1743**

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ABSTRACT

This microhistory of an African slave in eighteenth-century New France offers a unique series of angles with which we can examine the motivations, struggles and consequences of slavery in Canada. Mathieu L  veill   worked as a plantation slave in Martinique before arriving in Quebec to serve as the colony’s executioner. The story of his importation demonstrates how the buying and selling of these persons reinforced the social and economic connections between Canada’s elites and the rest of the Atlantic World. Though often imported as objects of luxury, the slaves themselves generally lived lives of social isolation, marred by their image as odd, foreign and deviant. L  veill  ’s enslaved status therefore made him the ideal candidate to fill the socially maligned position of the *bourreau*. L  veill  ’s Atlantic experience of itinerancy and exchange furthermore offers a glimpse onto the modes of interaction among the various marginalized groups participating in that system. While the population of Canadian slaves under the French regime paled in comparison to that of the more southerly colonies, the value of this study derives from exploring the uniqueness of the institution in this understudied context.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude microhistorique d'un esclave africain en Nouvelle France au XVIII^e siècle offre une perspective unique avec laquelle nous pouvons examiner les motivations et les conséquences de l'esclavage au Canada. Mathieu Léveillé a travaillé comme esclave dans une plantation en Martinique avant son arrivée à Québec. En arrivant, il a servi comme bourreau de la colonie. L'histoire de son importation montre comment l'achat et vente de ces personnes ont renforcé les liens sociaux et économiques entre les élites du Canada et le monde atlantique. Les esclaves étaient souvent importés comme des objets de luxe. Mais, comme sujets de l'histoire, les esclaves avaient des vies isolées, marquées par leurs images d'étrangers et de déviants. Léveillé, avec son état asservi, était le candidat idéal pour combler le poste du bourreau. Les expériences d'importation et d'itinérance de Léveillé offrent un aperçu des modes d'interaction entre les groupes marginalisés qui participaient au système. La population des esclaves canadiens ne compare pas aux nombres des esclaves aux colonies du sud; la valeur de cette recherche provient de l'exploration de l'institution unique qui est étudiée.

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INTRODUCTION

Nearly every significant work of historical scholarship on slavery uses case studies from geographical areas south of the old Mason Dixon line. This imaginary line, drawn in eighteenth century and made infamous by the Missouri Compromise of 1820, instilled the Western imagination with the false perception of a clear boundary between the land of the enslaved and the land of the free. At the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., an exhibit on life in colonial New England skips over the region's history of slavery and profiles the passionate gatherings of the evangelical abolitionists. When a museum educator at the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa is asked about the history of slavery in Canada, he answers, "there were no slaves in Canada," and then directs the visitor towards the exhibits on the Underground Railroad and the community of African Americans who moved to Alberta to escape the injustice of the Jim Crow laws. The central message of this narrative is very clear: while every other part of the Western hemisphere below the Mason-Dixon line must grapple with their history of slavery, New England and Canada can celebrate a history of freedom.

The geographical bifurcation of this narrative of slavery and freedom leaves an enormous void of discourse on the lives of slaves who lived and worked above the Mason Dixon. One such slave was Mathieu Lèveillé, who in 1733 was purchased by the government of New France and brought to Quebec to work as the executioner and torturer. Throughout his ten years of service, he carried out the unpleasant duties of branding, beating, applying the *carcan*, performing hangings and then destroying the bodies of the criminals of New France. He may have been the executioner of Marie-Joseph Angélique, another black slave hanged for igniting the 1734 Montreal fire. Due to

the trauma of his enslavement as well as the social infamy of his unclean trade, Léveillé never fully acclimated to his life in Quebec. In 1740, Léveillé offered his hospitality to three itinerant day laborers who subsequently robbed him of all his belongings. As the King's property, Léveillé had no rights of his own and therefore his attackers were not adequately punished for these crimes. Before his death in 1743, several long sojourns in the Hôtel-Dieu de Quebec interrupted his important duties. Intendant Hocquart remarked how the slave suffered from "melancholy," which he viewed as resulting from loneliness and the inhospitable climate of Canada. Seeking a quick solution to his many troubles, Hocquart attempted to ease Léveillé's loneliness by procuring a female slave to serve as his companion and wife. The marriage never took place. By the time the fiancé arrived in 1742, Léveillé was on his deathbed.

The vicissitudes of Léveillé's biography offer a unique series of angles with which we can examine the motivations, struggles and consequences of slavery in New France. Scholars have yet to explore and articulate the nature of Canadian slavery during the French period, often overlooking its uniqueness while failing to recognize its implications for relations with Indian slaves and intercolonial connections with the Caribbean colonies. This paper seeks to show not only how slavery existed in New France in comparison to other forms of slavery, but also to demonstrate how the buying and selling of these persons reinforced the social and economic connections between the colony's elites and the rest of the Atlantic World. Of the approximately 1,500 documented black slaves who lived in New France, historians have thus far traced the provenance of just a handful of men and women. Like Léveillé, these slaves arrived at the specific request of merchants and nobles with strong familial and professional contacts

throughout the Atlantic. Though often imported as objects of luxury, as subjects in history the slaves themselves generally lived lives of social isolation, marred by their image as odd, foreign and deviant. Academic studies of the lives of individual slaves can therefore have implications for how scholars understand the lifestyles of other marginalized groups in Quebec, including Indian slaves,¹ indentured servants, and women.

A microhistorical account of Mathieu L  veill  's life serves as what Laura Putnam refers to as a "telling example" within Atlantic History, proving the existence of a denied coherence and establishing "the spatial frame of reference and geographic unit of study for individual inquiries."² Such individual case studies of "unsuspected social networks" are often of great academic interest because they flow against the "fundamental currents" of previously conducted histories.³ At the same time, due to its uniqueness L  veill  's story does not offer many convenient tools for making claims about a common practice. It is therefore necessary to use this microhistorical example as an opportunity to discuss the distinctiveness of Canadian slavery within the Atlantic context, rather than forcing it into a preformed paradigm. While the limited scope of this study may not offer a comprehensive overview of change over time, it can successfully offer a deeper understanding of the meaning of race and slavery in eighteenth-century Quebec.

¹ When referring to indigenous slavery in Canada, I use the term "Indian slaves" rather than "Native American slaves" in order to be consistent with the secondary source literature referenced in the thesis. As most of this literature comes from the United States, the terminology differs from many of the preferred terms used in Canada. For example, see Allan Gallay, ed. *Indian Slavery in Colonial America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

² Laura Putnam, "To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World," *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 3 (2006): 615-630.

³ Putnam, 618.

In her brilliant study of the black slaves in Ancien Régime France, Sue Peabody describes slaves in France as “good for thinking” in the way Claude Lévi-Strauss stated, “cats are good for thinking.” Cats cross boundaries between wild and tame—exterior and interior. The presence of slaves “in nations with abstract commitments to liberty, as human chattel in a developing discourse on property rights, as brothers of a different color, placed them on the threshold, as it were, of new notions of citizenship, property, and identity.”⁴ Mathieu Léveillé’s biography is likewise “good for thinking.” Born in one far corner of the Atlantic World and transported to a colony often remembered only for its libertine fur traders and Jesuit missions, Léveillé’s presence in Canada challenges the imaginary line marking freedom in the north and slavery in the south. It further more removes many presumptions of New France as an idyllic colony of habitants comfortably cocooned from extortive aspects of colonialism occurring elsewhere. By identifying the connections between the slave-holding plantation society in Martinique and the Catholic missionary society of Quebec, the historical narratives fuse and Canada becomes incorporated into the larger plot of slavery in the French Atlantic.

Léveillé’s Atlantic experience of itinerancy and exchange offers a glimpse onto the modes of interaction among the various peoples participating in that system. A large portion of this paper will address the interesting social circumstances in New France that drove the colonial administrators to select Mathieu Léveillé to fill a position of repugnance. Facing a horrendous retention problem for their executioners, these administrators resorted to using their connections with France and the Caribbean to request the importation of this single individual. Once Léveillé arrived in Quebec, his

⁴ Sue Peabody, *“There Are No Slaves in France”: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 9.

dual status as a slave and executioner pushed him to the lowest possible rung of society. While his private life remained in the margins, as executioner for all of Quebec, Montreal and Trois-Rivières, Léveillé participated in the public sphere of the judicial system. He even encountered the lives of other slaves who found themselves paraded through the courts and executed for their crimes of theft and arson. However, when Mathieu Léveillé entered the judicial system as a victim of crime, it became clear those same courts would not protect the rights of a slave, a “social non-person” in the eyes of the law.⁵ Dying alone at only 34 years old, his life concluded in a manner that was sadly representative of most other slaves in New France.

Historiography:

Though several scholars of the criminal justice system in New France have briefly chronicled Léveillé’s life, no one has yet examined the story through the lens of his role as a Canadian slave. Despite the general public perception that “there were no slaves in Canada,” within academic scholarship there is no such blatant denial of the existence of slavery in the Northern colonies. Following in the tradition of Richard C. Wade’s, *Slavery in the Cities*, which redefined modern concepts on the spaces and boundaries of slavery and freedom, many historians have successfully looked beyond artificial perimeters of town and country, north and south.⁶ These scholars stress the importance of

⁵ Term borrowed from Orlando Patterson, referring to the social death of black slaves. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁶ See Richard Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), David Roediger and Martin H. Blatt, eds., *The Meaning of Slavery in the North* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998) and Jan Noel, ed., *Race and Gender in the Northern Colonies* (Toronto: Canadian Scholar’s Press, 2000).

widening the study of slavery to include New England and Canada as well as discussing Northern slavery in the context of greater international and Atlantic histories. However, using models and frameworks from the history of slavery throughout most of Atlantic world is insufficient for understanding slavery in the North. While further research on the history of slavery in Canada will not shed much new light on the realities of slavery in the Caribbean, the value of this scholarship will rather derive from exploring the uniqueness of the institution in this understudied context.

Primary sources on the lives of Canadian slaves are somewhat limited. In the vast majority of cases historians never learn more than the names, owners, dates of baptism, and dates of death. Slaves leaving behind the most extensive records were those who entered the judicial system as victims or perpetrators of crime. Marcel Trudel's *Dictionnaire des esclaves et de leur propriétaires au Canada Français* is an excellent resource which compiles most of the known records. Other documentation exists in the court records, such as the transcripts from the trial of Marie-Josèph Angélique. Many of the documents reveal how although the population of black slaves in Canada was relatively small, individual merchants and planters actively sought to import them in greater numbers.

Academic scholarship on the history of slavery in Canada did not begin until the late nineteenth century, before which time it was widely believed that slavery had never existed in New France or British Canada. François-Xavier Garneau, author of *Histoire du Canada*, went so far as to claim the King of France had legally prohibited the

introduction of slaves.⁷ The influence of Garneau's statements lasted several decades, leading to the popular misperception that the history blacks in Canada began and ended with the Underground Railroad. By the turn of the century, historians began to recognize Canada's own history of slavery, although most emphasized its relative small-scale and mild nature. Benjamin Sulte, author of *Histoire des Canadiens-Français*, is quoted by Marcel Trudel as stating, "les esclaves étaient simplement des domestiques formant partie de la famille de leur maître."⁸ Trudel elaborates upon how although some slaves did live in these scenarios, historians cannot generalize Canadian slavery in such terms. After Sulte, there were several historians of British Canada who stressed the importance of acknowledging Canada's shared participation in the slave system of North America. The works of William Renwick Riddell and T. Watson Smith both provide valuable information on the life and treatment of slaves in Upper Canada and Nova Scotia, although they offer only sparse accounts of the situation in New France.

During the 1960s and 1970s the historiography of blacks in Canada began to take its modern shape. Works written at this time started to acknowledge the history of Canadian slavery in the context of the larger history of blacks throughout the rest of the Americas. Robin Winks' monumental work, *The Blacks in Canada*, is the first comprehensive the history of the black experience from the time of slavery to the contemporary era. Beginning the book with chapter on the history of slavery in New

⁷ François-Xavier Garneau, *Histoire du Canada depuis sa decouverte jusqu'à nos jours* (Québec: Imprimerie de N. Aubin, 1845) 2, 447. Robin Winks is careful to point out that later editions of Garneau's book amended this inaccuracy, and that in this first edition Garneau "wrote deliberately to confuse his readers and to compare a slaveless French to the disadvantage of the British," Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1971) 19.

⁸ Marcel Trudel and Micheline D'Allaire, *Deux siècles d'esclavage au Québec* (Montreal: Hurtubise HMH, 2004) 147.

France, Winks argues that slavery did not mark the beginning of racial discrimination in Canada, as the institution was too small and too short-lived to develop a type of lasting racial segregation as seen in the United States. He also borrows from the ideas of Frank Tannenbaum, arguing that the presence of the Catholic Church mitigated the cruelty of the masters and inhibited the growth of a large slave-holding society. Most blacks in Canada, after all, cannot trace their ancestry to the first Canadian slaves. Taken as a whole, Wink's work contains no startlingly original observations on the history of slavery in Canada; his writing rather makes a greater contribution towards viewing blacks as important actors in Canadian history.

No individual has contributed more to the study of slavery in Canada than Marcel Trudel. Trudel dedicated his nearly sixty-year career to compiling the records of every known slave in French-speaking Canada. Over the years Trudel has identified 3,604 individuals who lived as slaves in New France before 1759, of whom 1,132 were black.⁹ Trudel also wrote extensively on slave treatment and the social aspects of slavery, particularly concerning the role of the Catholic Church in supporting its continued existence. Just as there is great debate among Latin American historians concerning the degree to which the Church condoned or condemned the institution of slavery, there also appear to be great disagreements among the historians of New France.

In formulating the methods for this thesis, I have drawn considerable influence from contemporary scholars on the subject who have focused on the reasons behind the general lack of public knowledge of this chapter of Canada's history. In her book, *The*

⁹ The other slaves included Indigenous slaves from various tribes throughout the interior of North America. Estimates for the number of black slaves have since grown. There may have been as many as 1,500 black slaves in New France.

Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery, Afua Cooper uses the story of Angélique in an attempt to expose a malicious act of silencing on the part of Canadian historians, who have purposefully expunged the history of slavery from the national narrative.¹⁰ Although well researched and passionately written, Cooper's arguments are overreaching. In her noble effort to assign Angélique the agency of a great slave rebel, she compares the slave's life to that of plantation slaves with which she would have never interacted or identified. While the history of slavery in Canada has been forgotten, ignored, and even glossed over, academic historians have no reasons or motivations to actively scrub out or bleach this stain in Canada's past. The solution to filling the gaps in the record cannot be found through anger, but through a careful examination of the documents—telling forgotten stories. In the case of Mathieu Léveillé, a detailed biography allows us to also tell the stories of the slaves he encountered on the scaffold. These stories may not reveal any grand schemes of slave resistance, but they do achieve the small victory of exposing a previously forgotten past.

Frank Mackey is another contemporary scholar dedicated to restructuring the historical narrative of Canadian slavery. In his book, *Done With Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal, 1760-1840*, Mackey offers a series of anecdotal stories of individual slaves, using various fragments of archival information to shape the various biographies and to provide each slave with distinct personalities and senses of agency. Mackey makes frequent use of the work of Marcel Trudel, although he notes some criticisms of the problems, inconsistencies, and inaccuracies found within the *Dictionnaire*. Mackey's primary focus is on the years of British control of Quebec, drawing particular attention to

¹⁰ Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2006).

the shift from slavery to freedom in Canada. His work therefore offers a useful methodological framework for constructing slave's stories while leaving a gap in the historiography for the French period.

Outline:

This paper begins with a brief history on the origins of Canadian slavery with an emphasis on the reasons for why there weren't (very many) slaves in New France. This section will primarily explain how Canadian slavery was distinct from other forms of Atlantic slavery, particularly due to its failure to become a prevalent practice throughout the colony. The next section of the thesis describes the circumstances of Mathieu Léveillé's importation, providing background on the general practices of procuring African slaves as well as information on the history of executioners of New France. As the people of New France grew increasingly uncomfortable with the work of the public executioner, importing a foreigner for the position removed any sense of community participation in the execution of criminal punishment. Part four examines the duties of Léveillé in his public role as well as an account of a criminal trial and execution concerning another black slave. The final two sections explore Léveillé's marginality in history and in historiography. As a target of theft and a frequent invalid inmate at the Hôtel-Dieu de Québec, Léveillé's final years are marked by nearly constant victimhood. This depiction of Léveillé, the archetype of the anti-hero, differs greatly from the other triumphant portraits presented by Afua Cooper and Frank Mackey. This representation of his life is not an attempt to deny Léveillé of his agency, but to reveal the true tragedies of his life in order to understand the harms and costs of slavery in the Canadian context.

Why There Weren't (very many) Slaves in Canada:

The presence of the few thousand slaves scattered across parts of New France and New England paled in comparison to the millions of African men, women, and children shipped to South America, the Caribbean, and the American South. Canada and New England exemplify societies that engaged in the systems of Atlantic slavery without ever becoming full-fledged slave societies. At the beginning of the European slave trade in Africa, the words “slave” and “African” were not yet synonymous. Slavery took on its racist form only during and after the transatlantic slave trade catapulted African into diaspora. This racial distinction of slavery did not develop in New France to the extent seen in the more southerly colonies. In the vast majority of legal cases, the laws concerning slaves did not even distinguish Indian and African slaves. Many theories have abounded for this difference: citing Puritan and Catholic mores, a harsh northern climate, and a lack of consumer demand. Through examining the social, environmental, and economic impediments to slavery in Canada, scholars can better understand the circumstances most conducive to slave societies.

Higher Latitude, Not Higher Morals:

François-Xavier Garneau claimed the Catholic clergy of New France promoted a moral opposition to slavery, preventing its introduction into Canada. Marcel Trudel proves the falsity of this statement, for throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, multiple ordinances, requests, notarized bills of purchase, and other forms of documentation recorded the active involvement of both the state and the church in a small

but dynamic Canadian slave trade.¹¹ Religious groups that purchased slaves included the Jesuits of Quebec and Saint-François-du Lac, the Brothers of charity in Louisbourg, L'Hôpital Général de Montréal, L'Hôpital Général de Québec, and L'Hôtel Dieu de Montreal. Trudel explains how these church-owned slaves received similar treatment to that of free servants. They were always baptized, they could marry other slaves or servants with the permission of their owners, and they lived and worked in the same conditions as many free whites.¹² However, servants could not be bought and sold in the same manner as slaves, and they were also free to eventually participate in the sacrament of ordination into the priesthood once their terms of service had ended. Such opportunities were not available to slaves. While the similarities between servants and slaves may be more numerous than their differences, the line between slavery and freedom remained profound and noticed by the enslaved.

Contrary to many well-circulated assumptions, the early settlers of New France and New England did not arrive with any pre-existing ideological oppositions to indentured servitude or slavery. Any puritan resistance to slavery stemmed not from a moral opposition to slavery, but from the conviction that “the human creatures’ lot to live by the sweat of their brow might discourage enslaving others in order to live in luxury and idleness – but the hard-working and hard-driving planter would be an instrument of God’s purpose.”¹³ Many other Puritans overlooked this aspect of their faith, speaking out about the possible advantages of increasing their dependence on slave labor, often basing

¹¹ Marcel Trudel “L’attitude de l’Église catholique vis-à-vis l’esclavage au Canada français,” *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association* 40, no. 1 (1961): 28-34.

¹² Ibid., 31.

¹³ Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (London: Verso, 1997) 237.

their arguments on the relative low cost of black slaves compared to white indentured servants. In 1645, Emanuel Downing wrote to Governor Winthrop,

Sir,...If upon a just war [with the Naragansetts] the Lord shall deliver them into our hands, we might easily have men and woeman and children enough to exchange for Moores, which wilbe more gaynefull pilladge for us than wee conceive, for I doe not see how wee can thrive until wee get into a stock of slaves sufficient to does all our business, for our children's children will hardly see this great Continent filled with people, soe that our servants shall desire freedome to plant for themselves, and not stay but for verie great wages. And I suppose you knew verie well how we shall mayneteyne 20 Moores cheaper then one Englishe servant.¹⁴

In 1689, M. Ruelle d'Auteuil of Quebec reported on the pitiable state of the lumber industry in Canada, expressing his belief that all problems of the labor shortage could be remedied if the King would only allow them "to have negroes or other slaves in the said country, as he was so gracious to allow the Islands of America." He advocated the advantageous investment of black slaves rather than free white labor, for "these types of negroes are adaptable to all sorts of work and as the cost of ownership is merely for them, their clothing and nourishment, there is nothing to stop the success of an undertaking, because with them we can lose nothing but labour."¹⁵

While men such as Emanuel Downing and Ruelle d'Auteuil primarily put forth the argument that a steady importation of slaves would not only solve the problems of their labor shortage, they also suggested that the presence of slaves would provide a greater sense of freedom for white servants who would then be at liberty to cultivate their own

¹⁴ Quoted by Ronald Bailey, "The Economic Impact of the Slave(ry) Trade on Textile Industrialization in New England," in *The Meaning of Slavery the North*, ed. David Roediger and Martin H. Blatt (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998) 8.

¹⁵ AN, Fonds des Colonies, Série C11A, Correspondance generale, Canada, vol. 10, fol 344-345, Ruelle d'Auteuil de Monceaux, Francois-Madeleine-Fortuné, Memorandum on Canada, 1689, accessed at <http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/angelique/archives/colonialcorrespondence/2297en.html>.

farms. Michel Bégon, the Intendant of New France from 1712 to 1726, claimed slavery would bring great wealth and opportunity to the habitants, who could expand their farms without forcing the elderly to work in the fields. The labor of slaves would also prevent widows and children from losing their land after the death of the husband.¹⁶ Edmund Morgan articulates this type of ideology as forming the very basis of the North American concept of freedom. By enslaving others, white Americans created the necessary counterpoint example to define their own liberty.¹⁷ Morgan's thesis traces the origins of this paradox to early Virginia, which he asserts as the birthplace of both American plantation slavery and American Revolutionary zeal.

As a Seignorial society with feudal origins, ending only after British conquest, it is not possible to argue that the presence of black slaves in New France formed the foundation for any white concept of "freedom" as it did in Virginia. Acknowledging their small numbers, approximately 1,400 between 1629 and 1833, furthermore demonstrates how these slaves did not supply the Canadians with a significant labor force. Men such as Ruelle d'Auteuil and Michel Bégon were therefore seriously misguided in their hopes and aspirations for slavery in the colony, though not in the ways in which many have previously believed. In the historiography of slavery as it existed in New France and New England, many have been quick to assume the institution as completely repugnant to the mores of the Puritan and Catholic religions. Slavery, when it did exist, is presented in

¹⁶ Marcel Trudel, *L'esclavage au Canada Français* (Quebec: Les Presses Universitaires Laval, 1960) 31.

¹⁷ Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975).

history as slack, mild, and uncommon.¹⁸ However, the early documents mentioning ambitious plans to introduce large numbers of slaves into the Canadian economy reveal that certain people in New France were poised and eager to become large plantation owners like those in the Caribbean. The reasons why large-scale slavery did not develop in Canada cannot be attributed to any higher moral ground, the presence of the Church, or royal prohibition. Robin Winks claims, “slavery in New France, like freedom, was never a matter of doctrine but rather of pragmatic circumstance of specific accident.”¹⁹ A fur trade dependent upon amicable native relations, the difficulties of maritime trade, the lack of consumer confidence in the value of slaves, and the harshness of the climate all created an inhospitable environment for black labor.

Reinforcing Indian Slavery:

With the fur trade fueling most of the economic growth of the colony, the habitant households and farms near the urban centers of Quebec and Montreal were small, self-sufficient, and self-contained. There was little need for outside labor apart from the occasional aid of neighbors and relatives. Under the French Seigneurial system, the habitants were technically ‘vassals,’ though they lived more like proprietors of their own small plots. The colonial lords enjoyed the privileges of collecting rents, taxes, and timber, although Allan Greer explains how these extractions “were never large enough to make seigneurs truly wealthy; the agricultural economy was too small, and the seigneurs

¹⁸ See descriptions made by early twentieth-century historian James Douglas, *New England and New France: Contrasts and Parallels in Colonial History* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1913) 292-310. Robin Winks likewise attributes the soft nature of slavery in New France to the good nature of the Catholic Church in *The Blacks in Canada: A History*. See also Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1947).

¹⁹ Winks, 21.

too numerous, for an opulent landed aristocracy to emerge.”²⁰ Meanwhile in the cities, free or indentured white servants, Indian servants, and “Panis” slaves performed most of the surplus domestic labor.²¹ African slaves, providing only minimal amounts of labor throughout New France, had little direct impact on the development and growth of the colony. Their presence instead indirectly ushered in the French Caribbean ideologies of slavery, which the Canadians in turn applied to the practice of receiving Indian captives.

The multiple laws protecting the purchase, ownership, and sale of Indian slaves throughout the colony all borrowed from previous legal actions concerning black slaves throughout the French empire. In 1689, Louis XIV granted permission for Canadians to own African slaves, although it was not until 1701 that he formally authorized the direct trade of slaves between Africa and Canada. The vast majority of slave owners in New France, however, were less concerned over the policies controlling the African trade and more invested in seeking validation for their claims over the growing population of Indian slaves. In 1709, Intendant Raudot, recognizing owners’ demands for legal protections of their enslaved property, passed an ordinance solidifying the legality of both Indian and African slavery in New France. Raudot’s ordinance alluded to an increasing problem of Indian slaves becoming insubordinate, often by denying their enslaved status and attempting to run away from their masters. Raudot reiterated the necessity of slaveholding for the healthy growth of a settler colony, stating;

Since the people of the Panis are as needed by the inhabitants of this country for Cultivating the land and for other work that may be Undertaken, as are the

²⁰ Allan Greer, *The People of New France* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1997) 39.

²¹ The term “Panis,” referencing Indians of the Pawnee tribes from the Plains region of North America, became a generic term to refer to all Indian slaves who had been captured neighboring tribes and sold into slavery in Quebec.

Negroes on the islands.... It is necessary to ensure the ownership of those who have purchased them or will purchase them in the future.²²

Raudot's logic reveals the critical role of the black slave of Canada in solidifying the distinctions between free white servants and slaves of color.

Although his Ordinance emphasized the need for all laws to be the same, Raudot failed to acknowledge that no other territories of the French empire viewed the two forms of slavery in the same manner. Indian slavery in New France did not being as the type of chattel slavery seen in the island colonies. Indian slave captives originally functioned as a form of collateral for the exchange of peaceful negotiations between neighboring enemy tribes. The French quickly began participating in this practice as "they discovered the importance of captive exchanges to the maintenance of friendly relations with the regions Native peoples."²³ Meanwhile in Louisiana, colonial administrators strictly prohibited the enslavement of Indians.

While the small African trade entering Canada clearly strengthened the ideology of the enslavement of the Indians, Marcel Trudel credits this Indian slave trade as the primary reason why African slavery was not widespread throughout New France. Unlike the Indian slaves in New England and South Carolina, the Panis were far removed from the original homeland, and therefore unlikely to run away or find refuge with neighboring Indians. Despite these benefits, the merchant classes of Montreal and Quebec had various compelling reasons for voices a preference for black slaves. By the early eighteenth

²² Jacques Raudot, Ordinance Relative to Slavery in Canada, 13 April 1709, Ordonnances des intendants, E1, S1, P509, Archives Nationales du Quebec, Centre de Quebec, accessed at http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/angelique/archives/colonial_correspondence/2295en.html.

²³ Brett Rushforth, "Savage Bonds: Indian Slavery and Alliance in New France," PhD diss., University of California Davis, 2003, 3.

century, ambitious colonials understood that a prosperous colony became such through the influx of African slaves. Throughout the Caribbean, black slaves helped facilitate a demographic takeover that choked out competition from Amerindian groups. Canadian merchants with experience in other parts of the French empire would have viewed African Slavery as a logical step in strengthening the economy.²⁴ More established French Canadians, however, knew of the importance of preserving neighborly relations with the Natives. As explained by Brett Rushforth's thesis, practice of receiving captives was believed to aid the building of strategic alliances, and this kept the general demand for African slaves relatively low compared to that of other American colonies.

The Lack of Capital Investment:

In the midst of a financial Crisis following War of Spanish succession, a slump in the fur trade made the colonists keenly aware of the structural weaknesses in their economy stemming from a lack of diversification. Intendant Michel Bégon felt the main causes of Canada's economic problems lay in its overdependence on the fur trade and its lack of a staple export crop. He advocated for the development of an iron and glassworks industry, which would greatly benefit from slave labor. However, dealing with issues of rampant domestic inflation, Canadians lacked any capital to invest in the slaves themselves.

As far as expense was concerned, Bégon argued, "the king's fund for covering the expenses of the colony, will provide the real means to pay the price for the negroes." He furthermore described the colony's elite as incredibly anxious to acquire imported slaves,

²⁴ See Blackburn, 1-25.

stating, “there is no doubt that all those who can afford to purchase them will do so.”²⁵ In 1720, Bégon once again claimed he had organized 100 willing buyers for 500 hundred black slaves. He wrote to the council of the Marine to ask for help in organizing the transaction with the Company of the Indies.²⁶ The company did not take advantage of the opportunity, and the merchants of the French slave trade did not see any advantages in fronting the massive expenses of slaving ventures to New France. Furthermore, after having experienced a domestic financial crisis, residents of New France were not eager to accumulate even more debt with slave traders. Few Canadians possessed the large amount of cash needed to purchase an African slave, and they lacked access to credit networks as well.²⁷

Colonial administrators paid 800 *livres* to purchase Mathieu Léveillé from a slave merchant in Martinique. Meanwhile a Panis slave could cost as little as 300 or 400 *livres*.²⁸ Planters and merchants in Quebec also had the option to enlist the labor of *engagés* or indentured servants, who would cost only 60 to 100 *livres* depending on their skills.²⁹ When discussing the types of labor needed in a North American colony, Peter

²⁵ Philippe Rigaud de Vaudreuil and Michel Bégon, Memorandum of 14 October 1716 to the Minister of the Marine, in *Collection of Manuscripts Containing Letters, Memorandums, and other Historical Documents Relative to New France* (Quebec: Imprimerie A. Côté et Cie, 1884), vol III, p. 21-22, accessed at <http://www/canadianmysteries.ca/sites/angelique/archives/miscellaneous/2296en.html>.

²⁶ Trudel, *L’esclavage au Canada Français*, 29.

²⁷ For more information on the importance of slave holders’ access to credit, see Russell R. Menard, “Financing the Lowcountry Export Book: Capital and Growth in Early South Carolina,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1994): 659-676 and Jacob M. Price, “Credit in the Slave Trade and Plantation Economies” in *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System*, ed. Barbara L. Solow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²⁸ Trudel, *Deux Siècles d’esclavage au Québec*, 115.

²⁹ Louise Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants in Seventeenth-Century Montreal*, trans. Liana Vardi (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1992) 24.

Kalm described indentured servitude as “preferable to all others, because they are not so expensive.” He went on to explain,

To buy a negro or black slave requires too much money at one time; and men or maids who get yearly wages are too costly. But this kind of servant may be gotten for half the money, and even for less; for they commonly pay fourteen pounds, Pennsylvania currency, for a person who is to serve four years, and so on in proportion.³⁰

A black slave, by comparison, could cost a Pennsylvania planter as much as one hundred pounds, after which time the owner was bound under obligation to feed and clothe the slave for the rest of his life. Despite Intendant Bégon’s assurance of the scores of eager purchasers in Canada, most ordinary habitants took a view similar to that of the Pennsylvanians. In conjunction with the commonly held belief that Africans could not adapt to the northern climate, the lack of consumer confidence and willingness to invest prevented the growth of a large-scale slave society in Canada.

When they did purchase slaves, the majority of Canadians found it easier to purchase Panis prisoners from their Native neighbors, who were far enough removed from their homelands that they did not pose a significant flight risk. With this readily available labor source, few owners saw the need to turn to the Caribbean for black slaves. As Allan Greer explains, “there was never enough wealth in the colony to support slavery on a massive scale.”³¹ Most labor needs were rather provided by self-employed craftsmen working in a relatively open market, much more loosely organized than the structured guild system in France. The possession of black slaves therefore usually represented more than a simple demand for labor. Dorothy Williams articulates this argument,

³⁰ Peter Kalm, *Peter Kalm’s Travels in North America: The English Version of 1770 Revised from the Original Swedish*, edited and translated by Adolph B. Benson (New York: Wilson-Erickson, 1937) 205.

³¹ Allan Greer, *The People of New France*, 56.

stating, “not only were the expensive African slaves used as domestic labour, they were also considered valuable property which functioned as status symbols for the elite...African slaves could be found in the houses of government officials, or of wealthy merchants and seigneurs.”³² Through examining the importation of Mathieu Léveillé as a telling example within the Canadian slave trade, we now turn to an explanation of the intricacies of those transactions.

The Importation of Mathieu Léveillé:

A Telling Example:

The preceding outline on the history of black slavery in New France primarily attempted to establish how it was not a prevalent practice throughout the colony. Why then should historians work to better understand the individual lives of the few slaves were imported into Montreal and Quebec? Though small in numbers, the black slaves of New France were intimately woven into the social fabric of colonial urban life. Under the French Regime, forty-seven high-ranking administrators collectively owned two-hundred and fifty Panis and Black slaves. The state itself owned twenty-eight slaves: twenty-five Amerindians and three blacks—including Mathieu Léveillé, the executioner in Quebec City from 1733 to 1743.³³ He arrived in Quebec out of necessity, for the Intendant Hocquart and the Governor-General Beauharnois were unable to find other suitable candidates for the position. After an economic depression caused by the mass inflation of card money in the 1710s, the economic recovery of the 1730s led to an increased

³² Dorothy W. Williams, *The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1997) 21.

³³ Trudel, *Deux Siècles d’esclavage au Québec*, 127, 139.

population and greater investments in urban commerce.³⁴ This healthy growth invariably led to a greater need for a strong governmental presence. As the ultimate enforcer of the court's decisions to punish the deviants of society, the slave Mathieu Lèveillé undoubtedly played a crucial role in maintaining public order. His life intercepted not only the circle of elites who participated in the slave trade, but also the lowliest vagabonds and miscreants of New France.

Lèveillé arrived in Quebec when he was 24 years old. The historical records do not indicate whether he was born in Martinique or in Africa. At the time of his birth the French slave trade had not yet peaked in the Caribbean, and African born slaves outnumbered their creole peers. It is therefore possible that Lèveillé traveled in the middle passage across the Atlantic, surviving the deplorable conditions of the cargo hold of a slaving vessel, and perhaps even making a stop at one of the French port cities. However, considering his young age upon arrival in New France, and the fact that the records refer to him as the "*Martiniquais*," Lèveillé could have also been Caribbean-born. In examining Mathieu Lèveillé's role as the executioner of Marie-Joseph Angélique, historian Denyse Beaugrand-Champagne speculates that the black executioner was condemned to death in Martinique for the murder of another slave. According to this account, Lèveillé accepted a commuted sentence in exchange for migrating to Canada to become the executioner.³⁵

³⁴ Yvon Desloges, *A Tenant's Town: Quebec in the 18th Century* (Ottawa: National Historic Sites, Park Service, Environment Canada, 1991) 26. In 1732, the population of Quebec City was 3780. By 1736, it grew to 4303.

³⁵ Denyse Beaugrand-Champagne, *Le Procès de Marie-Joseph-Angélique* (Outremont: Libre Expression, 2004) 228. Beaugrand-Champagne asserts Lèveillé's history of homicide as completely factual; however, she does not footnote any documentation of these events. The only two other chronographers of Mathieu Lèveillé's life, Marcel

Despite the unique nature of Mathieu Léveillé's biography, his presence in New France still provides an excellent case study for examining circumstances of the majority of maritime slave importations under the French regime. Although permitted by law, there are no documented cases of French merchants or planters purchasing slaves directly from Africa; large slave ships never sailed into the ports of the Saint-Laurent. African slaves were exotic items, brought into the country by elites who regarded them as luxury goods. Part of the appeal was the difficulty and expense with which these slaves were acquired. The scattered records of these slave purchases between settlers of New France and the rest of the colonies point to a small yet important effort to strengthen and homogenize the economies of the French Atlantic through the trade of luxury items.

The Caribbean-Canadian Connection:

In 1734, two state-owned Fox slaves were sold into continued bondage and exported to Martinique.³⁶ As they left the country of their birth to work in the inhospitable sugar cane plantations of the Caribbean, Mathieu Léveillé was still learning to adjust to his new life in the colder climate of New France. This type of exchange was marred by logistical difficulties and yielded only minimal profits. Once Hocquart and Beauharnois decided to request permission to purchase Léveillé, it took over three years

Trudel and André Lachance, make no mention of this alleged murder. Lachance's omission in particular, due to his otherwise detailed account, leads to certain doubts of Beaugrand-Champagne's sources. Her error perhaps arose from confusion with the story of another black executioner in Canada who did have a history of murder. François, the executioner of Louisbourg in 1740, was also imported from Martinique. Condemned to death for the murder of a young black boy, they offered François a deal: work at the gallows, or be sent to the gallows himself. See Kenneth Donovan, "Slaves and Their Owners in the Ile Royale, 1713-1760," *Acadiensis* 25, no. 1 (Autumn 1995): 3-32.

³⁶ Trudel, *Deux siècles d'esclavage au Québec*, 140.

for him to finally arrive in Quebec. One possible reason for carrying out this seemingly inefficient transaction could have been encouragement from the metropole to strengthen communication and trade between the various French colonies of the Western hemisphere. When Jean-Baptiste Colbert began to reorganize the colonies in order to help strengthen the absolutist state, he aimed to incorporate all the colonies into a single French mercantilist economy. In 1664, he established the Compagnie des Indes Occidentales, which would export raw materials from Canada to the Caribbean, cutting out the Dutch merchants. Canada's economy would grow through this export trade, encouraging settlement and diversification. The company did not, however, succeed in carrying out this vision of a united empire.

Colbert failed to account for the short shipping season in Canada, which overlapped with the turbulent hurricane season of the Caribbean. Quebec was furthermore a somewhat secluded realm compared to France's ports in Africa and the Caribbean. The sea route from France to Canada had two grueling stages. The first began westward from France, where ships moved in a zigzag motion against the headwinds on a four to five week journey. The voyage continued on for several months within the fishing zones of the Grand Banks, with its rocky coasts, icebergs, deep fog, and storms. The biggest event of the summer was the arrival of the King's ship, which arrived in September with new recruits, supplies, and bills of exchange.³⁷ Because the ports of Quebec were only open five to six months out of the year before the Saint-Laurent froze over for the winter, Canada simply could not serve as the supply closet for the Caribbean.

³⁷ For more information on shipping routes and the seclusion of Quebec from the rest of the Atlantic, see Kenneth J. Banks, *Chasing Empire Across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713-1763* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

Despite efforts by both the French and English to prevent it, a bustling (and illegal) trade developed between New England and the French sugar islands.

Throughout this period the fur trade continued to dominate the Canadian economy, further preventing any integration into the busier triangular trade. W.J. Eccles explains how although the profits were quite significant, “very little of this money was invested in other economic endeavors, however; instead it provided the people with costly imported amenities of life.”³⁸ In his studies of colonial correspondence between the Caribbean and New France, Jacques Mathieu has identified the efforts of colonial governors to bolster inter-colonial trade in the 1710s and 1720s, increasing the availability of luxury items such as cotton, chocolate, fruits, indigo, coffee, and tobacco. A smaller portion of the Canadian-West Indian trade involved the selling of Indian and African slaves between the colonies. Due to the direction of winds and currents, the ships making the rounds between France, and Canada, and the Antilles were most likely to follow routes that pushed the ships southward. This meant that trade of Indians slaves from Canada to the Caribbean was both easier and more common than any trade of African slaves northward to Canada.³⁹

While merchants encountered great difficulties in their attempts to import black slaves from the Caribbean, the ideology of slavery was much easier to transport. The language of the Raudot’s Ordinance of 1709 shows that the elite class of New France was well versed in the *Code Noir* 1685, which they viewed as applicable to the slaves in Canada. While the number of Panis slaves always outnumbered the blacks, Intendant

³⁸ W.J. Eccles, *The French in North America 1500-1783*, revised edition (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1998) 98.

³⁹ Jacques Mathieu, *Le Commerce entre la Nouvelle-France et les Antilles au XVIII^e siècle* (Montreal: La Corporation des Éditions Fides, 1981) 25-26, 63-67.

Raudot advocated for the homogeneity of slave laws throughout all French colonies. In his Ordinance, he lamented the case of the purchasers of slaves in Canada, who were frustrated by the high prices, “owing to these savages being inspired with a sense of freedom by those who did not purchase them, which means that they most always abandon their masters... under this pretext that there are no slaves in France.”⁴⁰ He went on to argue for the legality of slavery throughout all of Western hemisphere, “for it is well known that in the West Indian Colonies, negroes are bought and sold into slavery, and that all colonies must be considered on the same footing.”⁴¹ Ironically, Raudot’s ordinance removed this equal footing, for with its enactment Canada became the only French colony to formally recognize and institutionalize Indian slavery.

While Colbert’s vision of a highly profitable trade between Canada and the Caribbean never came to fruition, Canada was not completely isolated from the rest of the Atlantic World. Jacque Mathieu’s research suggests that inter-colonial trade may have been more active than indicated by the local records, as ships leaving Quebec almost always stopped in Louisbourg before setting out for their final destination. Mathieu’s estimates claim at least a quarter of the ships leaving Quebec for Louisbourg in 1734 continued on to the Antilles.⁴² The short shipping season and lengthy voyage may have prevented a strong Atlantic connection, but for the nobility of New France, it was always still possible to arrange for the safe delivery of goods. This weak but vital relationship between New France and the Caribbean served to normalize the idea of slavery in a

⁴⁰ Raudot, “Ordinance relative to slavery in Canada.”

⁴¹ Quoted and translated by Douglas, 304.

⁴² Mathieu, 87.

society with relatively few slaves.⁴³ The Ordinance of 1709 furthermore demonstrates how the difficult maritime passages between France, Canada, and the Caribbean failed to thwart the steady flow of ideas and perceptions on the nature of slavery in the French Atlantic. While three years was a long time to wait for procuring Léveillé, the transaction was not unfeasible or without precedent.

Slaves for the Elite:

The plan to acquire a black slave to serve as the executioner of New France greatly resembled the other requests for black slaves in the colony. The majority of consumer demand came from a small circle of nobles and bureaucrats who had some exposure to the lucrative slave economy of the Caribbean. The closely related Bégon and Beauharnois families, which collectively owned at least thirty slaves, had strong ties to both colonial administration and Caribbean trade. Michel Bégon V, a cousin of Madame Colbert, lived as a planter in Martinique and served as an Intendant of Saint-Domingue. His son Michel de La Picardière married Jean-Élisabeth de Beauharnois and became the Intendant of New France. His second son, Claude-Michel, also accepted various positions in the colonial administrations of Quebec. While growing up in the American Islands with their father, the Bégon sons observed the management of servants and slaves as a critical aspect of ensuring a healthy colony. In a report to the Minister of the Marine in 1716, Intendant Bégon identified Canada's lack of slaves as the primary cause of all economic difficulties. He wrote, "the fact there are few inhabitants in Canada causes all

⁴³ Greer, 87. "Slavery was a central element in the European colonization of the Americas, and so white settlers considered the institution perfectly normal, even though the economy of New France had room for only a limited number of slaves."

businesses to fail since workers and day labourers are difficult to find and come at high price. The colony could grow and prosper in business if negroes were brought over.”⁴⁴ If the English in Massachusetts and the Dutch of Manhattan could profit from slave labor, he saw no reason why Canada should not follow their example.

As explained in the previous section, most residents of New France lacked the necessary capital or credit with which they could buy large numbers of agricultural slaves. The members of the colony’s elite therefore purchased most slaves as domestic workers. One such eager consumer was Elisabeth Bégon. In 1712, Claude-Michel Bégon left Martinique to accept a position as a naval captain in New France. Billeted in the house of the King’s storekeeper and Elisabeth’s father, Étienne Roberet de Morandière, he quickly fell in love with the young Canadian woman. The Bégon family disapproved of the match, and they called Elisabeth “L’Iroquoise” in reference to her lowly colonial birth. The couple married anyway, and their daughter, Marie-Catherine-Elisabeth, married Michel de Villebois de la Rouvillière in 1737. After Marie-Catherine died in childbirth, Michel de Villebois accepted a post as the King’s commissioner in Louisiana. As the ever-faithful mother-in-law, Elisabeth Bégon remained in Montreal and cared for his daughter. She wrote to him frequently providing him with news of his daughter and his property.

Elisabeth Bégon’s letters provide excellent insight into the weak but important connections between the slaves in Canada and those throughout the rest of the French Atlantic. Elisabeth, “L’Iroquois,” grew up in a wealthy but not aristocratic household. Her father owned six Panis slaves, mostly women. After her marriage to the brother of

⁴⁴ “Memorandum of 14 October 1716 to the Minister of the Marine.”

the Intendant and her daughter's marriage to the *ordonnateur* of Louisiana, Elisabeth found herself the caretaker of two black slaves imported from the West Indies. As she climbed the social ladder, these exotic persons surrounded her with a cloud of prestige. Madame Bégon's experience with the slaves furthermore demonstrates the lack of practicality in investing in black slaves. They were expensive to import, and upon arrival they frequently grew ill. In 1748, she wrote to Michel de Villebois about "our poor Pierre," who "is once again in the hospital, where he goes every three months, always hoping that it is for the last time; he is little more than skin and bones. Jupitere [slave] is in similar shape and your horse is so-so."⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the family continued to request the arrival of even more slaves. In writing to her father in Louisiana, Marie-Catherine de Villebois asked for a little slave child as if the demand was no greater than asking for a new pet: "My dear papa... What a sweet pleasure it is to receive news of you!... I would be so much happier if you had sent word that you were arriving soon. If you can't send yourself, please send me, I beg you, a little negro boy. He would bring me so much happiness."⁴⁶

The majority of slave owners throughout New France came from wealthy or noble families with influence and kinship ties throughout the French Atlantic. The men responsible for requesting the importation of Mathieu Lèveillé fit this profile perfectly. The governor of New France, Marquis Charles de Beauharnois, was born in 1671 in

⁴⁵ Elisabeth Roberet de la Morandiere, Letter regarding her slaves, 25 December 1748, *Journal de Madame Begon*, p.2, Archives Nationales du Quebec, Centre de Quebec, accessed at <http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/angelique/archives/diaryjournalreminiscence/2301en.html>

⁴⁶ Elisabeth Bégon, *Lettres au cher fils; correspondance d'Élisabeth Bégon avec son gendre, 1748-1753* (Montreal: Hurtubise, 1972) 201, translation by Jane Coleman Harbison.

France. During his lifetime, the Beauharnois family became one of the most notorious socially mobile families within the colonial administration. They were related to both the Colbert and Phélypeaux families by marriage, and among them they supplied three intendants and two governors general in the colonies. In 1716, Beauharnois married a rich widow named Renée Pays, gaining an estate worth 600,000 *livres* including three slave plantations in Saint Domingue. When Charles de Beauharnois became the Governor of New France in 1726, he had already traveled extensively throughout the French Atlantic and would have been broadly familiar with the slave trade.

Gilles Hocquart, the Supreme Controller and Intendant of Canada, was also a native of France and a veteran of *ancien régime* administration. He had a strong professional background in the Ministry of the Marine as well as personal connections with the Beauharnois family. From 1721 to 1729, he worked as the chief financial administrator for the Minister of the Marine in Rochefort. Upon his arrival in Quebec, Hocquart was at first skeptical of New France bureaucracy, which he viewed as “inefficient, understaffed, and poorly paid.”⁴⁷ Using his experience from the shipyards of France, he worked to increase the naval capacities of Quebec’s port and strove to make use of Canada’s many natural resources, mainly timber. He also supervised the construction of better land routes between Quebec, Montreal, and Lake Champlain. As the Intendant and the head of the Superior Council, Hocquart directed all matters of justice, finance, and civil administration while the Governor oversaw military operations, communication with the crown, and relations with the Natives. Hocquart could

⁴⁷ Donald J. Horton, “Gilles Hocquart,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, accessed May 18, 2011. http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=1951&interval=20&&PHPSESSID=6n4f1ret5b1vjm7b2mss4c6jj7.

“intervene in any case, take it out of court, and render judgment himself if he thought that justice was not being done, and appeal against his decision could be had only at the Counsel des Parties.”⁴⁸ Without doubt, the disorganization and inefficiencies of Quebec’s judicial system would have greatly frustrated such a meticulous administrator. Though he wielded an enormous amount of power, he could only access it through the presence of a reliable executioner to carry out his sentences.

Filling a Position of Repugnance:

Mathieu Léveillé’s story digresses from other histories of slaves in Canada not in the manner in which he was requested, but because of the purposes for his importation. Léveillé did not work as a fashionable manservant in the house of a rich merchant—he burned the flesh and tied ropes around the necks of the most dejected outcasts of society. Through this work, Léveillé enabled the courts of New France to fully enforce its laws and policies, creating social stability among a growing settler population. Peter Moogk describes the judicial system in New France as reflective of “government ambitions to create a renewed France in North America.” In a system that blended paternalism, authoritarianism, and compassion, the administration cared for the poor and indigent in exchange for their total obedience. Just as in France, “everyone, except the king, had a natural superior on earth and anyone who claimed to be free from authority was a threat to public order.”⁴⁹ The maintenance of this public order thoroughly depended upon the

⁴⁸ Eccles, *The French in North America, 1500-1783*, 81.

⁴⁹ Peter Moogk, *La Nouvelle France: The Making of French Canada—A Cultural History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000) 59. Examples of this type of paternalistic benevolence include the state’s generous support for the charities of the Roman Catholic Church, which transformed New France into a veritable welfare state.

court's ability to select and retain a reliable *maître des hautes œuvres*—an executioner and torturer. After enduring nearly three decades of deviant, inebriated, or blatantly disobedient executioners, Beauharnois and Hocquart heeded the Minister of the Marine Maurepas' suggestion of importing a black slave from Martinique for the job.

Although the occupation of an executioner is often recorded in history as a “defiled trade,” which encountered a great deal of public distain and ostracism, this was by no means a universal trend throughout all of early modern Europe. In Germany, the executioner was the ultimate trade of dishonor. With each performance of public torture or hanging, an executioner would become increasingly despised and cut-off from the rest of society. This exclusion could have a contagious effect on the executioner's entire family, for any association with the dishonorable trade could damage the required “unsoiled, pristine, immaculate” reputation of a guildsman.⁵⁰ Merely having wine with the hangman's wife could damage a woman's husband's position in a guild, as “honorable guildsmen insisted that dishonor was transmitted by marriage and by blood in both the male and the female line.”⁵¹ Meanwhile in France, executioners of the *ancien régime* received a much more mixed public reception. The crowds generally recognized the name and face of the executioner. In Paris, the position became an established family career under the Sanson ‘dynasty’ of executioners. In Rennes, executioner Jacques Gannier was frequently invited to serve as the umpire in games of boules. In Caen, the executioner earned extra income from curing diseases and mending broken bones. The executioners so carefully guarded the integrity of their position, these “men of standing

⁵⁰ Kathy Stuart, *Defiled Trades and Social Outcasts: Honor and Ritual Pollution in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 195.

⁵¹ Stuart, 216.

who bought their offices... would bring you before the courts for defamation if you called them *bourreaux*.” At the same time, “these sinister local dignitaries were universally maligned: their wages, it was said, were thrown at their feet when they were paid.”⁵²

In the context of the forced social intimacy of a settler colony, the people of Montreal and Quebec exhibited a particularly strong abhorrence towards executioners because any involvement with the dishonorable trade could have negative implications for their future success. In 1737, Philippe Benoit, an innkeeper in Quebec, went to court against the navigator Laurent Roy in a case of alleged slander. Since his arrival seven years earlier, Benoit had worked hard to earn a solid reputation and build a successful business. He married the daughter of a local habitant, Marguerite Cuiadée, and opened a small inn in the lower town. When Laurent Roy came to stay at the inn, he believed he saw a family resemblance between Benoit and the executioner of La Rochelle. In court, Benoit claimed that Roy quickly spread this news around through the town, after which he began to encounter a great deal of prejudice. Benoit claimed monetary compensation for the damages to his reputation. Throughout the court proceedings, the executioner was never referred to by his official title of *maître des hautes œuvres* or *l'exécuteur de la haute justice*, but by the derogatory name *bourreau*.⁵³

The antipathy expressed towards executioners in New France reflected an eighteenth-century European trend towards the marginalization and repugnance of the

⁵² John McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment: Changing Attitudes to Death Among Christians and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981) 387. Also see Marcel Marion, “Bourreau,” in *Dictionnaire des Institutions de la France Aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Éditions A & J Picard, 1993) 54.

⁵³ “Procès contre Laurent Roy, navigateur, à la requête de Philippe Benoît,” 26-29 mai 1737, BAnQ TL5, D1134.

position. Kathy Stuart describes how in seventeenth-century Augsburg, executioners had enjoyed a limited amount of social mobility and influence within the trade guilds, especially in practicing medicine. Throughout the next century this mobility came to a screeching halt. As the trade guilds became more influential in society, they exercised that power to more heavily police the boundaries between honorable and dishonorable trades. The French executioners also eventually experienced a similar decline in popularity, though not until the aftermath of Enlightenment thought and “the rising tide of sentimentality at the end of the *ancien régime*.”⁵⁴ The example of the civil case against Laurent Roy suggests that this social decline of the executioner may have accelerated faster in the colonial setting. Executioners in France often had higher wages than men of more reputable trades, while Canadian executioners were paid an extremely low yearly stipend, ensuring their continued marginality.

One cause of the Quebec executioners’ ostracism may have stemmed from the colonial administrators’ distress over failed attempts at alternative means of punishment. Following a tradition of many other colonial experiments, the administrators of New France sought out innovative methods for preserving law and order without having to resort to the unclean practices of public execution or torture. They possessed the power to regulate who came into the colony—setting quotas for men of certain trades, single women, servants, and slaves. In seventeenth-century Montreal, one Intendant remarked how although the immigrants mostly arrived in a state of destitution, the people were nonetheless “easy to govern, for despite their varied origins and the fact that vice forced the majority to seek asylum in this country in order to evade prosecution, they are

⁵⁴ McManners, 387.

nevertheless rather docile and manage to live fairly peacefully.”⁵⁵ As the population grew this tone of complacency began to disappear. In 1730, Beauharnois and Hocquart wrote to Maurepas with a request “to no longer send any libertines to Canada. Too often they escape the hand of justice due to the widespread complicity of the habitants.”⁵⁶ They also complained about the insalubrities of the prison cells, and spoke of the necessity to build a better fortification around the entire facility. Because criminals could easily escape to New England or the wilderness in the West, they often had to be hanged in effigy rather than hunted down and tried. Beauharnois and Hocquart therefore indicated the need to send a greater force of archers to the colony to track the fugitives. Despite efforts to combat crime before it occurred and to punish criminals through sentences in prison and to labor in the galleys, the limited resources of the courts in New France necessitated an executioner.

Canada’s most informed authority on the subject of executioners in New France, André Lachance, writes, “le public general n’était aucunement hostile à la torture. Elle était considérée alors comme une sévérité nécessaire.”⁵⁷ While Lachance’s publications are meticulously researched and brilliantly presented, his work stops short of fully unpacking the significance of the anecdotal incidents of the executioner’s unpopularity in comparison to the French examples. While executioners in France adapted to their maligned position, the *bourreaux* of Canada were despised. The Canadians may have accepted acts of torture and execution as necessary evils to maintain good public order,

⁵⁵ Quoted by Louise Dechêne, 24.

⁵⁶ Lettre de Beauharnois et Hocquart au Ministre, 15 Octobre 1730, Fonds des Colonies, Série C11A, Correspondance Générale, Canada, vol. 52, fol. 78-85 v, National Archives of Canada. Translation by Jane Coleman Harbison

⁵⁷ André Lachance, *Le Bourreau Au Canada Sous le Régime Français* (Quebec: Société Historique de Québec, 1966) 23.

but they sought to remove all association with the executioner's tasks. In 1708, Intendant Raudot was forced to pass an ordinance ordering all the carters of Quebec to submit to lending their horses and carts for the purpose of carrying condemned persons to their place of execution.⁵⁸ In 1726, Beauharnois wrote desperately of the need to send over "les gens non dangereux" as well as an "exécuteur des hautes œuvres" who would be granted a salary equal to the wages of executioners in France. With no one in the position, criminals were acting with complete impunity due to the government's inability to punish them for their offenses.⁵⁹

Finding an executioner in a community that found the trade repugnant to society was no easy task. In the early days, the lack of an official executioner was less problematic. A member of the military could improvise a solution. Before the Ministry of the Marine began to seriously attend to Beauharnois' repeated requests for an experienced executioner, it became common practice to suspend the death sentence of a condemned criminal if he agreed to become the executioner for a prescribed period of time—usually for life. Of the fourteen executioners who lived and worked in New France, ten were former criminals: including two murderers, three thieves and one duelist.⁶⁰ W.J. Eccles describes the Quebecois criminal-turned hangman as "universally reviled," going on to state, "this attitude stands in marked contrast to that of the public in

⁵⁸ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁹ Lettre de Beauharnois et Dupuy au Ministre, 30 Octobre 1730, Fonds des Colonies. Série C11A, Correspondance Générale, Canada, vol. 48, fol. 90-105 v, National Archives of Canada.

⁶⁰ Lachance, *Le Bourreau au Canada*, 53-54.

England and on the Continent, where hangings were spectacles greatly enjoyed by all. Why the Canadians differed in this respect is a mystery.”⁶¹

As there are no historical records of the public’s reaction to public execution in New France, Eccles’ speculation may be slightly far-fetched. The evidence does prove, however, a consistent pattern of exclusion and condemnation of the individual executioners. Up until 1733, the executioner had to live among the people he would later torture or kill, and there was no convenient sense of separation between the public scaffold and everyday life. The process Michel Foucault described as “the disappearance of torture as public spectacle,” a phenomenon of the very late eighteenth century, may have occurred even earlier in the New World context. The justice system and the state ceased wanting to participate in the violence of a public punishment, which it perceived as a continuation of the violence of the crime. “If it too strikes, if it too kills, it is not as a glorification of its strength, but as an element of itself that is obliged to tolerate, that it finds difficult to account for.”⁶² By importing Mathieu Léveillé—the ultimate foreigner—the authorities of New France filled an empty position and also socially distanced themselves from the final act of execution.

The Low Retention Rate of Executioners in New France:

In 1680, Jean Rattier, became Quebec’s first official executioner. In 1672, he had married Marie Rivère with whom he had five children. Unable to support their large family by working as servants in Trois-Rivières, the couple relocated outside of the town where they rented a small farm from the seigneur de St-Francois-du-Lac, Jean Crevier.

⁶¹ Eccles, *The French in North America*, 83.

⁶² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977) 9.

Shortly after the move Rattier became involved in a property dispute and public brawl that resulted in the death of a twenty-year-old woman. Having been found responsible for her death, Rattier avoided hanging by accepting the job of executioner. His entire family suffered the social shame of the position, and their finances were never stable. In 1695, Rattier found himself in the uncomfortable position of putting the *carcan* (collar shackle), on his own wife, who had been accused of stealing.

After Rattier's death in 1703, the administrators of New France never again successfully found a candidate who could fill the post for more than a few years. In 1705, the *Procureur Général du Roi*, François-Madeleine Ruette d'Auteuil, commissioned a condemned prisoner named Jacques Élie to become the executioner. Born in La Rochelle, France, Élie grew up to become a well-known thief in the town. He was pressed into service on a ship heading to Acadia where he worked for a merchant named Jean Dumont. Making the claim Dumont had held back his wages, Élie stabbed his master in the stomach with a kitchen knife after dinner. Convicted and sentenced to death, Élie had to travel to Quebec for the execution, as there was no *bourreau* in Port Royal at that time. He accepted an offer of a commuted sentence in exchange for becoming the executioner and performed his first hanging two days later.

For his services, Élie received an annual salary of 300 *livres* and a small house near the port of Saint-Nicolas in the upper town. Although built within the fortifications of the city and located near the gate, the lodgings were small, poorly furnished, and full of vermin. For some extra income—and no doubt some extra excitement—Élie began stealing food and livestock from various households through the city, and sold the goods at the market. His partner in crime was Pierre Rattier, the son of the former executioner.

Lachance describes this relationship as resembling two adolescent males misbehaving in order to combat boredom, for, “Il faut préciser que son emploi de bourreau ne l’occupe pas beaucoup. Avec une execution ou deux par année et quelques applications de peines corporelles comme le fouet ou le carcan, il a beaucoup de temps libre.”⁶³ To fix this idleness, the members of the Superior Council decided to house Élie with the Jesuits in an experiment to see if their positive moral influence could turn him away from further criminal activity. The priests believed his larceny would stop if he had the companionship of a wife. In 1707, they presented him with Marie Maréchal, a *filles du roi* arriving aboard the ship *Le Chameau*.⁶⁴ The couple and their two children suffered the social ostracism of an executioner’s family. Lachance imagines a situation where the locals frequently insulted the family. The children were completely secluded from other playmates. People threw stones or refuse whenever they ventured into town. The Rattiers were their only friends. In 1710, the family had endured enough. They paid a Native named Nicolas 150 *livres* and full set of clothes to smuggle them into English territory. One morning whilst traveling, Nicolas shot Jacques Élie in the head while his family slept near a riverbank. Nicolas then killed the children with a hatchet and shot Marie in the stomach. Though found and rescued by some nearby habitants, Marie died a few weeks later at the Hôtel-Dieu. While officials failed to track down Nicolas, they nonetheless held a trial. His effigy was sentenced to be broken on a Saint-Andrew’s cross, and then placed on the wheel to ‘die’ in full view of the public in the marketplace. Pierre Rattier, who had

⁶³ André Lachance, *Juger et punir en Nouvelle-France: Chroniques de la vie quotidienne au XVIIIe siècle* (Montreal: Libre Expression, 2000) 46-47.

⁶⁴ For more information on the *filles du roi* who arrived by the shipload, see Jan Noel, *Women in New France*, Canadian Historical Association Historical Booklet No. 56 (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1998) and Yves Landry, *Les Filles du roi au XVIIe siècle: orphelines en France, pionnières au Canada* (Montreal: Leméac, 1992).

meanwhile accepted the post of executioner in exchange for exoneration from his crimes of theft, performed the act.⁶⁵

Although he served a lengthy stint, the historical record is more silent on Pierre Rattier after he became the executioner. As the son of the only other man who held the post with any longevity, Pierre Rattier would have entered the position with considerably more experience than other executioners, but after he left the position there was once again an enormous void in the judicial system. In a 1726 letter describing the need for an executioner, Beauharnois writes as if the colony had gone several years with no one in the position. After receiving no reply from Maurepas, Beauharnois wrote again in 1727 desperately outlining the colony's "besoin d'un bourreau."⁶⁶ On May 18th, 1728, Maurepas replied with the suggestion that Beauharnois procure a black slave from the islands.⁶⁷ Later that month, Maurepas wrote again recanting his previous suggestion because he had found a suitable candidate for the position among a group of thirty inmates from the Hôpital Général de Paris about to embark for Canada. Attempting to assuage Beauharnois' fears of welcoming more libertines into the colony, Maurepas wrote, "ce ne sont pas de grands criminels et la plupart ont des métiers." Maurepas

⁶⁵ The complete story of Jacques Élie, gleaned and compiled from archives throughout Canada, is recounted in André Lachance's *Juger et Punir*.

⁶⁶ Lettre de Beauharnois et Dupuy au Ministre, 20 Octobre 1727, Fonds des Colonies. Série C11A, Correspondance Générale, Canada, vol. 49, fol. 29-30 v, National Archives of Canada.

⁶⁷ Lettre de Ministre à Beauharnois et Dupuy, 18 Mai 1728, Fonds des Colonies. Série C11A, Correspondance Générale, Canada, vol. 50, fol. 492-493 v, National Archives of Canada.

nominated Gilles Lenoir, a convicted felon, for the position of executioner, “et cela évitera d’acheter un nègre à la Martinique pour cette destination.”⁶⁸

Lenoir arrived in Quebec in the fall of 1728, where he was hospitalized for two months for a fever contracted during the voyage. During this time it became clear that the man suffered from a variety of mental infirmities. He was an alcoholic, prone to violent outbursts of drunkenness. By October of 1729, Beauharnois was writing again to Maurepas complaining of Lenoir’s conduct:

Le homme Gilles Lenoir, maitre des hautes œuvres est un si mauvais sujet, si furieux dans le vin et d’une conduite si desordonné que l’on est obligé actuellement de le tenir toute l’armée en prison, d’ailleurs il est imbecile. Nous vous supplions Monseigneur, de trouver bon que nous le renvoyons l’année prochaine, un nègre conviendrait mieux pour ce service ce [sic] tout autre, et vous pouviez donner vos orders pour en faire acheter un a la Martinique qui sera Envoyé en ce pays-cy.⁶⁹

In the interim period between 1730 and Mathieu Léveillé’s arrival in 1733, Guillaume Langlais, an immigrant from London, volunteered for the job. At fifty-one years, he was the oldest executioner on record. Like many others before him he was not an ideal candidate for the position. His position required him to travel to the prefectures of Montreal and Trois-Rivières to serve as their executioner on an occasional basis— a duty inhibited by his age. In October 1730, Beauharnois wrote, “Guillaume Langlois ne vaut pas mieux que Gilles Lenoir comme maître des hautes œuvres.”⁷⁰ At this point, all

⁶⁸ Le Président du conseil de Marine à MM. Beauharnois et Dupuy, 24 Mai 1728, Fonds des Colonies, Série B, Lettres envoyées, vol. 52, fol. 549, National Archives of Canada.

⁶⁹ Lettre de Beauharnois et Hocquart au Ministre, 25 Octobre 1729, Fonds des Colonies, Série C11A, Correspondance Générale, Canada, vol. 59, fol. 41-46 v, National Archives of Canada.

⁷⁰ Lettre de Beauharnois et Hocquart au Ministre, 25 Octobre 1730, Fonds des Colonies, Série C11A, Correspondance Générale, Canada, vol. 52, fol. 142-143v, National Archives of Canada.

domestic resources had been exhausted, and it was time to look elsewhere for a suitable executioner.

On May 18th, 1731, Maurepas wrote to Beauharnois and Hocquart with the following news:

Nous sommes surpris d'apprendre que Monsieur Hocquart n'a pas trouver [sic] un exécuter de la haute justice dans la colonies. Cela étant, il faudra acheter un nègre au Îles pour faire cette fonction. J'écrirai à Monsieur Jacques Pannier d'Orgeville, fonctionnaire du roi à la Martinique, d'envoyer à Quebec l'esclave noir demandé.⁷¹

Over two years later in July of 1733, and at the cost of 800 *livres*, Mathieu Léveillé arrived in Quebec. Stripped of his ancestral identity in Africa, and now torn from any community he had found on a plantation in Martinique, Léveillé arrived in a land where he knew no one. This sense of isolation and foreignness is exactly what made him an ideal candidate to serve as the *maître des hautes œuvres*. Though filling the position of a government worker, he remained a slave. His importation and subsequent experiences therefore reflected the collective experiences of both the executioners of New France and its slaves. Through this double identity, Mathieu Léveillé suffered the ultimate marginality.

⁷¹ Quoted by André Lachance, *Juger et Punir*, 175.

The Slave Executioner and the Slaves He Killed

In describing the difficulties of researching the history of the African presence in Quebec, Frank Mackey laments the struggles of piecing together stories through the fragmentary accounts of other historians. Through the repetition of each other's findings, the circulation of factual errors, or omission of pertinent material, the resulting historical narrative suffers from a superficiality that can only be cured when historians start "to look beneath, immersing ourselves in the sources, and hope that an enigmatic or misleading reference in one will find its explanation or rectification in another."⁷² This case study of Mathieu Léveillé offers tremendous insight into the life of an executioner in Quebec, while also providing such "explanation or rectification" for the stories of several other black slaves living in New France. When Mathieu Léveillé arrived in Quebec, he became completely uprooted from the life he knew in Martinique, experiencing the ultimate social isolation in his day-to-day life. Living alone in his humble house on the grounds of the Intendant's palace in the upper town, he lacked opportunities to interact with anyone aside from the occasional fellow slave or vagabond.

When performing his duties, however, Léveillé entered a public space where he interacted with all echelons of society—albeit under uncomfortable circumstances. As the executioner, Léveillé had continuous involvement with the judicial system of New France, leading to his interaction with other black slaves. Of the 1400 black slaves in Canada under the French Regime, most documentation of their lives exists only in a scattering of baptismal records, deeds of sale, and accounts of death. The only slaves to leave behind a more extensive legacy were those involved in various criminal procedures.

⁷² Frank Mackey, *Done With Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal, 1760-1840* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2010) 9.

While the records constitute a veritable cornucopia of information compared to the dearth of documentation of most other slaves, the case studies are not numerous. Of the 4185 slaves who lived in Quebec, only 18 can be found in the preserved criminal records.⁷³ This small number can be partly attributed to the owners' choice to punish deviant slaves more privately, and partly to some records becoming lost. Slaves entered the formal judicial system only in the event of serious crimes with lasting effects outside of their own households. Once in court they officially received the exact same treatment as free persons—a practice from which judges occasionally digressed once the sentencing began. Marcel Trudel sees this equal treatment under the law as evidence of a greater sense of equality between slaves and free servants, stating, “En tout cas, cette égalité de l’esclave et de l’homme libre devant la loi et, en même temps, cette grande rareté de criminels démontrent, une fois de plus, l’intégration normale de l’esclave dans notre société.”⁷⁴ During his ten years as the executioner in Quebec, Mathieu Léveillé oversaw the death of two African slaves: Jean-Baptiste Thomas and Marie-Joseph Angélique. A careful examination of Thomas' criminal trial begs to question whether Trudel's concept of “l'intégration normale de l'esclave dans notre société” ever existed.

Crime and Punishment in New France:

Throughout the 1730s the Canadian people were not predisposed to extreme acts of violence or large-scale crime. Intendant Hocquart described them as enjoying “recreation and Kindness; they pride themselves on being Brave; they are Extremely

⁷³ Trudel, *Deux siècles d'esclavage au Québec*, 223.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 224.

sensitive to reprisals and the least punishment.” At the same time, the Canadians also exhibited a proclivity towards certain mild vices:

They are Self-seeking, vindictive, subject to drunkenness, make regular use of Eau de vie, and are known to not be truthful. This Portrait applies to a great number of people in the Countryside while city people are more refined; all of them adhere to Religion, few of them are villainous types; they are fickle; they have a too-high opinion of Themselves which Prevents them from achieving the success they are capable of in the arts, Agriculture, and Commerce. We can add to this the Idleness brought on the Length and Severity of the winter: they enjoy Hunting, navigation, Travel and have little of the crude and countrified air of our peasants in France. They are Generally compliant When given recognition and governed fairly, but they are defiant by nature.⁷⁵

Hocquart’s descriptions of the most common types of social deviance are consistent with the records of the types of crimes most commonly committed throughout New France.

André Lachance reports that throughout the entire French regime in Canada, there were only 118 capital cases. The surviving records include 37 thefts, 36 murders, 16 sexual offences, 14 crimes against morals (incest, abortion and counterfeiting), 4 duels, one act of treason, and a few other isolated serious crimes. For lesser crimes, public whippings, brandings, banishments, slave labor on the galleys, the iron collar, and *l’amende honorable* were all much more common forms of punishment.⁷⁶

According to Peter Moogk, the colonists of New France did not frequently demand blood atonement for the crimes of their peers. While the colonists still gathered *en masse* to enjoy the modest entertainment provided by a public execution, they only rejoiced in the death of a criminal when he had committed a crime that negatively

⁷⁵ Gilles Hocquart, Description of the Canadians, 1737, Archives Nationales, Fonds des Colonies, Série C11A, Correspondance Générale, Canada, vol. 67, fol 95v. accessed at <http://www.candianmysteries.ca/sites/angelique/archives/colonialcorrespondence/2272en.html>.

⁷⁶ See André Lachance, *Le Bourreau Au Canada*, and André Lachance, *Crimes et Criminels en Nouvelle-France* (Montreal: Boréal Express, 1984).

impacted the entire community. Cases involving crimes of religion such as blasphemy or eating meat during lent significantly decreased because no one had an invested interest in seeking out punishment for these relatively victimless crimes. The residents of Quebec expressed much greater outrage over crimes involving physical injury or damage to personal property.⁷⁷ Although it is impossible to describe the public reception to executions throughout the public spaces of Quebec without first hand accounts, John McManners offers an account of how typical eighteenth-century French crowd reacted to a public execution:

They are not there, says Marivaux, to rejoice at the cruelty or to mock pain: they are, simply, in their stupid, cruel fashion, curious. They want to see the spectacle, to have something to talk about; they want to undergo the surge of powerful emotions, to weep with sympathy and tremble with alarm; they enjoy, not cruelty itself, but the shudder of fear that the sight of cruelty brings.”⁷⁸

The punishments functioned as both a school and a theater, “a dramatic lesson about the consequences of criminal acts; it was designed to reinforce morality by terrifying onlookers.”⁷⁹ The executioner’s official title, “maître des hautes œuvres,” referenced the elevated planes on which the punishments took place.⁸⁰

This public fanfare surrounding the actual acts of punishment contrasted greatly with the social status of the executioner himself, who lived in the tucked away “Redoute au Bourreau” in the upper town near the Intendant’s palace. This social separation was partly a result of the authorities’ intention to surround the “maître des hautes œuvres” with a cloud of mystery and terror, and party a result of the community’s own refusal to

⁷⁷ Peter Moogk, “The Liturgy of Pain, Humiliation, and Death: The Execution of Criminals in New France,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 88, no. 1 (2007): 89-112, 92.

⁷⁸ McManners, 390.

⁷⁹ Moogk, “The Liturgy of Pain,” 102.

⁸⁰ Lachance, *Le Bourreau Au Canada*, 23.

associate with this merchant of death. Mathieu Léveillé's low status as a black slave certainly helped to reinforce both reasons for avoiding the executioner. Despite their inability to avoid the spectacle of a public punishment, Canadian colonists consistently distanced themselves from the process as much as possible. The entire town would shun the executioner and his family in order to separate themselves from the impurity of bodily defamation. Moogk references examples of carters and boatmen who refused to provide transport for the condemned and the cadavers. Reputable carpenters also refused to participate in the construction of the gallows.⁸¹ There are even examples of townspeople protesting the placement of a execution if it took place too close to their front doorstep. Considering their reluctance to become active participants in the process of punishing their criminals, the residents of Quebec must have felt a great amount of relief when a foreign black slave took on the dreaded role.

The Crimes of Jean-Baptiste Thomas:

Throughout North America, many slaves in urban centers refused to adjust to their enslaved status. Unlike the plantation slaves, isolated from the outside world of freedom, the slaves in the city "saw all around them every day the possibilities of what they considered a better life."⁸² The space of the urban setting enabled to move fluidly in and out of the master's house, thereby living a substantial portion of their daily lives beyond the purview of the master. In Charleston, South Carolina, this liberty gave many slaves the opportunity to socialize with other slaves and free workers, arranging

⁸¹ Moogk, "The Liturgy of Pain," 103-104.

⁸² Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) 209.

clandestine gatherings in grocery shops, grog houses, and the houses of slaves who “lived out” apart from their masters. The social result of this limited freedom resulted in the breaking down of “the line between free and slave, and sometimes between colored and white.”⁸³ While the small numbers of black slave living in Quebec in the 1730s would have prevented any such large assemblies, slaves such as Léveillé and others would have had the opportunity to socialize (or even conspire) with Indian slaves, white servants, and anyone else who was willing to talk to a slave.

On June 6th 1735, a young black slave named Jean-Baptiste Thomas stood before a court in Montreal, charged with the crime of stealing household goods from his owner, the widow Louise Lecompte-Dupré.⁸⁴ Under interrogation Thomas pleaded his innocence. He named François Darle, his alleged accomplice, as the true mastermind behind the crime. After the court found both men to be responsible, Thomas admitted to selling the stolen linens to Charlotte Daragon, Charlotte Ondoyer, and Marie Venne. The women were subsequently charged with knowingly purchasing stolen property. Finding all of the accused guilty of their crimes, the court sentenced Thomas and Darle to death by hanging. Marie Venne and Charlotte Martin would receive “flétrissement,” a beating and branding with the *fleur de lys*. Charlotte Daragon, despite her criminal history of stealing a wallet from Mme Godefroy de Linctot, had an influential husband working as the drummer for the troops of the Marine in Montreal.⁸⁵ Knowing that her husband would likely give her “*une bonne volée*,” the court gave Charlotte Daragon a lesser sentence of

⁸³ Wade, 144.

⁸⁴ “Procès contre Jean-Baptiste Thomas, esclave noir chez Louise Lecompte, veuve de Magnan, accusé de vol,” 6 juin 1735 – 22 août 1735, BAnQ TL4, S1, D4251.

⁸⁵ “Procès entre Angélique Godefroy de Linctot, plaignante, et Charlotte Ondoyer dite Martin, épouse de Laurent dit St-Laurent, tambour de la Compagnie DuVivier, accusée de vol de portefeuille,” 15 janvier 1734 – 12 février 1734, BAnQ TL4, S1, D4108.

being summoned to the chamber for a public reading of her crimes, which equated to a public humiliation.

As Thomas and Darle were charged with capital offenses, they were entitled to an appeal to the Superior Council in Quebec. Marcel Trudel attributes the appeal to the actions of the widow Lespérance, who did not want to see the execution take place in the open space in front of her house.⁸⁶ The widow in fact had very little cause to worry, for whenever a criminal in New France received a sentence involving any type of corporal punishment, the Criminal Ordinance of 1670 obligated the *procureur du roi* to file an appeal. Mathieu Léveillé was furthermore the only executioner in Quebec at the time, and as the sentencing and execution nearly always occurred on the same day, the authorities had no choice but to finish the trial in Quebec. Once the condemned arrived in the capital, the Superior Council confirmed the ruling of the lower court. Marie Venne and Charlotte Martin were beaten, branded, and locked away in the Hôpital-Général de Québec for three years. The week of August 22, 1735, Mathieu Léveillé constructed an elevated gallows in the marketplace and waited for the condemned to arrive for their execution. There are no historical records of the actual hanging.

Considering the nonviolent nature of the crime, Thomas and Darle's sentence of death by hanging for domestic theft was particularly harsh. Even the accomplices received severe physical punishments and public humiliation. The criminal investigation and judicial process, spanning a timeframe of several months, took much longer than most ordinary instances of theft. The one remarkable detail of the crime was the presence of a black slave, who after disposing of the stolen goods had received François Darle's

⁸⁶ Trudel, *Deux siècles d'esclavage au Québec*, 210.

assistance in an attempt at escaping to New England. This act of flight transformed the crime from *le vol simple* (no arms or aggravation), to *le vol qualifié* (committed in grave circumstance). *Le vol qualifié* could warrant the death penalty, while *le vol simple* called for much milder punishments. Sentencing was furthermore contingent upon the type of person who committed the crime. Age, sex, and social status nearly always impacted the courts decisions, and “un vol commis par un domestique, un apprenti, un compagnon, un engagé ou un esclave est considéré comme beaucoup plus grave que celui commis par un journalier.”⁸⁷ Jean-Baptiste Thomas’ crime was particularly grave because he committed it against his mistress’s property and then tried to run away and escape his bondage.

Another particularly offensive dimension of the crime was the amount of collaboration between a slave, a vagabond, and women. Everyone involved in the crime belonged to a marginalized group of society. This simple act of theft became viewed as a mass conspiracy of disorder among the second-class members of society. The social milieu of the streets Montreal in the 1730s consisted of soldiers, servants, convicts, slaves, and other marginalized groups that André Lachance has described as making up ‘The Fourth Estate.’⁸⁸ Kenneth Banks expands upon Lachance’s concept of the Fourth Estate to observe how these societies existed in all the colonies throughout the French empire. Banks explains how although the French authorities depended on the labor of soldiers, servants, and slaves, these unattached reckless males often posed a tremendous threat to authority. 40% of those accused of crime in the colonies were males under the age of 25. Officials reacted by attempting to segregate the classes and limit the mobility

⁸⁷ Lachance, *Crimes et Criminels en Nouvelle-France*, 46.

⁸⁸ André Lachance, ed., *Les Marginaux, les exclus et l’autre au Canada aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Quebec: Fides, 1996).

of these marginalized groups, encouraging marriages to their own kind and more rooted existence.⁸⁹

As members of the “Fourth Estate” the slaves of the French Empire “bore the brunt of two overlapping species of authoritarian government: that imposed by the metropolitan state and that enacted by local authorities.”⁹⁰ Kenneth Banks makes the important point that in Canada, the small populations of the marginalized groups only made them even more vulnerable to state control and coercion. The outcome of trial of Jean-Baptiste Thomas reveals the intent of the Superior Council to not only punish the crime of theft, but to also issue a stern warning against any forms of collaboration between slaves, vagabonds, and women. Mathieu Léveillé, acting under the orders of his slave masters, was forced to punish them all. He thrashed the two women within an inch of their lives throughout four busy locations in the city, and then tied their arms behind their backs as he branded them with the *fleur de lys*. He then put the rope around the neck of one of the few black men he had seen since he left his home in Martinique.

⁸⁹ Banks, 128-130.

⁹⁰ Banks, 152.

A Victim of Crime:

Friendships and Relationships in the Fourth Estate:

Throughout his ten years serving as the executioner of Quebec, Mathieu Léveillé suffered from a great ennui arising from his social standing as both the city's most reviled tradesman and a lowly black slave. His duties required him to work at most a few days out of each month, and he likely spent his remaining days listlessly wandering through town or sitting alone in his small house close to the outskirts of the town. As a black slave uprooted from his ancestral home in Africa, Mathieu Léveillé spent the early part of his life reforming a culture, identity, and a sense of dignity within the slave community on a plantation in Martinique. After arriving in Quebec, he experienced the most solitude and loneliness he would ever know. Assuming he received the same treatment as other executioners, Léveillé would have received an annual salary of 300 *livres*, room and board in the executioner's quarters, and the limited freedom to associate with other servants and slaves. Unlike other executioners, however, Léveillé remained a slave, and as such he saw no escape from the horrific cycle of brandings, beatings, and tortures followed by days and weeks of deafening silence and solitude.

Léveillé fought his loneliness by forming friendships with the only people willing to associate with a black slave—vagrants and vagabonds, and his social marginalization led him to show his generosity towards men in similar positions. In 1736, he opened up his home to François Mousset, a fourteen-year-old day laborer. Over the next few years Léveillé also extended his hospitality to a small circle of Mousset's fellow vagabonds, including Nicolas Coutant and his sister Elisabeth. André Lachance describes these friendships as arising out of desperation to escape his social isolation, though it is also

possible that Léveillé identified with the plight of their destitution. Urban day laborers made as little as 30 sols a day for five months out of the year.⁹¹ Executioners likewise suffered from low wages. Jacques Élie, a former executioner of New France, had attempted to increase his income by collaborating with thieves in small acts of larceny. If Léveillé shared any traits with the men who came before him, he may have aspired to eventually escape his duties and subsist through scavenging and itinerant labor. Had Léveillé ever considered running away, these connections with the criminal underworld of New France would have been essential to his survival.

Despite any temporary benefits, these were not the types of social relationships that would enable Léveillé to rise in society. After a few short years, Léveillé's friendships with Quebec's outcasts began to grow sour. In 1740, Léveillé's friends betrayed his trust by getting him intoxicated and running off with his most valuable belongings, which included a jacket, a blanket, and a pot.⁹² François Mousset masterminded the scheme with the help of Nicolas and Elisabeth Coutant. In her interrogation before the Superior Council, Elisabeth testified that Léveillé had given her these items so that she could sell them and in exchange provide him with *eau de vie*.⁹³ Mousset maintained a similar story. By presenting Léveillé as a drunkard who was willing to sell his goods for alcohol, the three vagabonds sought to discredit their accuser's character. The court proceedings suggest, however, that Léveillé was not directly involved in the trial. He was never interrogated, nor did the court ever take his

⁹¹ Dechêne, 226.

⁹² "Procès criminel contre François Mousset, Nicolas Coutant dit Lafranchise, vagabonds, et Elisabeth Coutant, sa soeur, femme d'Antoine Tranchant, accusés d'un vol chez Mathieu, maître des hautes œuvres," 6 décembre - 19 décembre 1740, BAnQ TL5, D1234.

⁹³ A clear and colorless brandy made from fermented fruit.

deposition. The prosecution still rejected the accused persons' defense, presenting evidence that the thieves had attempted to leave the country with the stolen goods. During the sentencing, the court did not prioritize seeking reparations for Lèveillé. As the King's executioner, Mathieu Lèveillé and his belongings constituted a form public property. François Mousset, Nicolas Coutant, and Elisabeth Coutant were therefore not categorized as thieves but classified under the more general term of common vagrants.

Mathieu Lèveillé clearly did not exhibit excellent judgment in choosing his friends, though this hardly sets him apart from other slaves of similar circumstances. Many of the known relationships between slaves and white workers involved some type of criminal activity. Most slaves processed within the judicial system of New France had free white workers as either accomplices or collaborators. The King's Procurer refused to believe a black slave could ever commit a crime without the help and expertise of some white vagrant. Jean-Baptiste Thomas worked with several white workers in order to pilfer and resell his goods. Marie-Joseph Angélique, hanged for starting the 1734 Montreal fire, was widely believed to be romantically involved with a white worker named Claude Thibault. Convinced that Thibault must have been the instigator of the arson, Intendant Hocquart had Angélique tortured in the hopes she would name him as her accomplice. Even after Mathieu Lèveillé put her through the *question extraordinaire*, she failed to implicate Thibault.⁹⁴ The court still convicted Thibault of accessory and

⁹⁴ For more information on the relationship between Marie-Joseph Angélique and Claude Thibault, see Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of Angélique*, and Denyse Beaugrand-Champagne, *Le Procès de Marie-Josèph Angélique*. Marcel Trudel also offers the interesting argument that Angélique started the fire in an effort to run away with her white lover, though both Cooper and Beaugrand-Champagne dispute this interpretation. Cooper claims Angélique was seeking revenge against her cruel mistress, while

conspiracy, but as he had long since fled the city Angélique received the full burden of his punishments. These were friendships and connections within the marginalized underworld, and in most of the provided examples, it is clear that the slave was often used as the pawn or victim of white scheming.

The Social Context of Vagrancy:

Léveillé's attackers emerged from a social atmosphere that did not encourage their autonomy or prosperity. Once their term of indentured servitude came to and end, they were less like free laborers and more like masterless servants, enduring all the social limitations of servitude without benefitting from the patronage of a master. Sarah Maza explains how an eighteenth-century servant's demeaned status can be explained by the two core characteristics shared by nearly all domestic workers in eighteenth-century France: poverty and foreignness.⁹⁵ Over the course of the eighteenth century, the servant-master relationship was slowly transforming. What was once a paternal relationship based upon a sense of reciprocal eventually became a less familial and more service-oriented agreement, releasing masters from the responsibility of ensuring the general welfare of their servants.⁹⁶ As more of Europe's poor became itinerant temporary workers, the rates of urban poverty increased along with the rates of poverty and vagrancy. This process existed in a parallel form within New France, particularly by the eighteenth century when many *engagés* began reaching the end of their terms of service.

Beaugrand-Champagne believes there is not sufficient evidence to assume that Angélique ever committed the crime in the first place.

⁹⁵ Sarah C. Maza, *Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century France: The Uses of Loyalty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 57.

⁹⁶ Maza, 266.

Louise Dechêne describes the indentured servants' status as forming within both the social and spatial margins of seventeenth-century Montreal: "Masters with only one or two hands lived in the town and used these laborers to work properties located several leagues away in isolated spots with crude shacks for shelter. With few exceptions, the *engagé* began life in the colony in straitened circumstances."⁹⁷ Prior to 1660, the *engagés* at least enjoyed the opportunity to eventually rise to the status of a habitant. By the end of the century, "it became more difficult for *engagés* to integrate rapidly into existing framework and achieve a modest social ascension, compared to earlier recruits who had been expected, as it were, to create that framework."⁹⁸ Masterless, rootless, and without steady employment, many of these able-bodied workers had to resort to begging or receiving charity, earning the title, "vagabond." As explained by Robert Jutte, "vagrancy was exacerbated not only by deteriorating demographic and economic conditions but also by growing government efforts to eradicate the problem."⁹⁹ Being poor became a crime. Any acts of deviance among such persons warranted harsh punishments as the government increasingly "stressed the connection between beggary and criminality."¹⁰⁰

In eighteenth-century Europe and North America, theft was the most frequent crime among poor offenders. Common motives included hunger, alcoholism, and a desire to rise above the status of indentured servant or day laborer. In New France, many vagabonds stole in the hopes of earning enough money to purchase a return passage to France. Elisabeth Coutant's motive for stealing from Mathieu Léveillé may have been the

⁹⁷ Dechêne, 27.

⁹⁸ Dechêne, 36.

⁹⁹ Robert Jutte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 148.

¹⁰⁰ Jutte, 145.

desire to escape the abuse of her husband, Antoine Tranchant. Throughout her interrogation, she was repeatedly asked why she was not with her husband, and she did not provide answers. The deviant woman was eventually told she would be spared corporal punishment if she agreed to return to her husband in Cap-à-l'arbre. This treatment suggests that the court showed greater concern over Elisabeth's crimes against her husband and society than any role she played in stealing from Mathieu Léveillé.

The Social Death of Mathieu Léveillé:

In the first trial in the lower court, all three criminals were sentenced to wear the *carcan* in the public market place, to bear a sign labeling them as vagrants, to be banished from Quebec for three years, and to pay a fine of three *livres*. Upon the appeal to the Superior Council, the crimes against Mathieu Léveillé were all but forgotten. Elisabeth was essentially released without consequence, while François and Nicolas were found guilty of vagrancy. As vagrants and not thieves, they received the milder punishment of just two months in prison. For stealing clothing and kitchen items and attempting to leave the country, Mousset and the Coutants were technically guilty of "le vol qualifié," which according to André Lachance could have warranted the death penalty. Mousset, in particular, theoretically should have received a harsher penalty as he had a history of criminal behavior.¹⁰¹ Fortunately for the criminals, Léveillé's slave status significantly diminished the severity of the crime. Throughout the entire trial, Mathieu Léveillé was presented as a piece of supporting evidence in the crime rather than victim of theft. As

¹⁰¹ After his release, Mousset went on to continue his ways of vagrancy and banditry, ultimately receiving a much more severe sentence of three year's labor in the galleys. Lettre de Hocquart au Ministre, 26 Octobre 1742, Fonds des Colonies, Série C11A, Correspondance Générale, Canada, vol. 78, fol. 80-81v, National Archives of Canada.

Léveillé's entire existence blended into government that owned him, his personal effects were likewise the property of the state.

Léveillé's absence from the trial indicates the extent to which his enslavement led to his social death. Léveillé may have lived in the same house as his predecessors, receiving the same stipend, but his position in society fundamentally differed from all others in that he lacked any position at all. In the eyes of the court, the slave Léveillé lacked full humanity. Orlando Patterson describes the relationship between slavery and death as originating in the earliest forms of chattel slavery:

Archetypically, slavery was a substitute for death in war. But almost as frequently, the death commuted was some punishment for some capital offense, or death from exposure or starvation. The condition of slavery did not absolve or erase the prospect of death. Slavery was not a pardon; it was, peculiarly, a conditional commutation. The execution was suspended only as long as the slave acquiesced in his own powerlessness.¹⁰²

To a certain extent the executioners who preceded Mathieu Léveillé experienced a similar type of social death. They were criminals who accepted the reviled position in exchange for their lives. Léveillé's lowly status, however, exceeded that of all those before him. Unlike Jacques Élie or Gilles Lenoir, Léveillé was born into this state of being a "social nonperson." Like all other slaves, "alienated from all "rights" or claims of birth, he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order."¹⁰³

The crime and subsequent trial reveal the existence of certain racist aspects of the slavery in New France, for Léveillé's social death exposes fundamental consistencies with the ideology of slavery as seen in the Caribbean. Much of the historiography on race and racism throughout the French empire focuses on the period of the French

¹⁰² Patterson, 5.

¹⁰³ Patterson, 5.

enlightenment, when racist ideology emerged as a means of justifying the enslavement of Africans in the midst of new concepts of liberty.¹⁰⁴ Recent scholarship from Pierre Boule defines the origins of racism in France as beginning much earlier. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, African slavery created strong racial distinctions between black and white, and blacks became viewed as inferior from biological limitations to their intellect and morality.¹⁰⁵ Guillaume Aubert likewise identifies the beginnings of French racism in the anti-miscegenation laws of the early eighteenth century.¹⁰⁶ Léveillé's lack of property and protection indicates the racial bifurcation of rights in Quebec. He first experienced the bitter taste of betrayal and violation, only to discover that the justice system of New France had no invested interest in granting him rights under the law.

¹⁰⁴ Saliha Belmessous, "Assimilation and Racialism in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century French Colonial Policy," *American Historical Review* 110, no. 2 (2005): 322-349.

¹⁰⁵ Pierre H. Boule, *Race et esclavage dans la France de l'Ancien Regime* (Paris: Perrin, 2007).

¹⁰⁶ For more on the revisionist theories on the origins and timeline of racism in New France, see Belmessous and Guillaume Aubert, "'The Blood of New France': Race and Purity of Blood in the French Atlantic World," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2004): 439-478.

A Slave's Melancholy:

The emotional trauma following the theft of his belongings exacerbated the condition of Mathieu Léveillé's increasingly fragile health. Ever since his arrival in New France, Léveillé had been a regular patient at the Hôtel-Dieu de Quebec. After disembarking his ship from Martinique in July of 1730, he was hospitalized for a fever he contracted during the long voyage. He stayed there for over two months, only to return once again in January of 1734 when he became ill with the flu. The next known record of Léveillé's hospitalization was in February 1740, though it is likely he made other visits throughout the winter months of other years. In 1742, Intendant Hocquart ordered an examination for Léveillé from the king's physician, Jean-François Gaultier, who diagnosed him with a form of "mélancholie" arising from homesickness and inability to adapt to Quebec's climate.¹⁰⁷ While it is not possible to determine exactly what Gaultier observed and concluded in his diagnosis, understanding eighteenth-century concepts of race and medicine can lead to certain assumptions about the symptoms Léveillé may have exhibited. While the form of melancholy plaguing Léveillé could have resembled a modern physician's definition of a psychological depression, Gaultier's diagnosis would have drawn influence from theories of climate and humoral imbalance.

Race and Climate:

After Léveillé's death in 1743, Maurepas expressed doubts on the utility of a black executioner, suggesting that the open position be filled only with whites in the future. This incredulity reflected a general attitude towards the appropriateness of

¹⁰⁷ Lachance, *Juger et Punir*, 178.

Africans in Canada. Throughout the eighteenth century, the leaders of New France constantly questioned whether Africans could survive in Canada's harsh climate. Governor General Philippe de Rigaud Vaudreuil actively discouraged the importation of black slaves because of this concern. He believed "the climate is too cold and it would be too costly for the inhabitants to clothe them in winter... It would be more advantageous to have salt traffickers brought over."¹⁰⁸ Still others countered his argument by pointing to the examples of black slaves in New England and New Netherland who had lived long and healthy lives. Ruette d'Auteuil even suggested, "their clothing will consist of Beaver pelts, a fur that will shield them from the harsh winter cold and will cost little since, in wearing them, they will oil the pelts and the pelts will increase in value."¹⁰⁹

In the early eighteenth century, there were still lingering uncertainties over whether an African would maintain his complexion after a transatlantic voyage, as French naturalists were only just beginning to discover the inherited nature of race. A paper presented at the French Academy of the Sciences in 1702 suggested all African infants were born white aside from dark spots around fingernails and genitals. Throughout childhood their skin then became darkened throughout exposure to sun and heat.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile Jesuit missionary Father Labat denied the hot climate as a source of blackness:

¹⁰⁸ "Memorandum of 14 October 1716 to the Minister of the Marine."

¹⁰⁹ Ruette d'Auteuil de Monceaux and François-Madeleine-Fortuné, Memorandum on Canada, 1689, Fonds des Colonies, Série C11A, Correspondance Générale, Canada, vol. 10, fol. 344-345v, Archives Nationales, accessed at <http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/angelique/archives/colonailcorrespondence/2297en.html>.

¹¹⁰ William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter With Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530-1880* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) 11.

If that were so, all the people who would live with them or at least their children who were born there would get the same color; and equally as a result the Negroes who were transported to the countries furthest away from the sun, more temperate and colder, should change color. But no such thing occurs, the experience of several centuries shows that.¹¹¹

Although there was no consensus on the causes of blackness, it was generally agreed that persons of the black race were degenerate mutations from the greater white man. Within Mathieu L  veill  's lifetime, scientists, naturalists, and theologians debated the source of this degeneration as they weighed the theories of monogenism versus polygenism. While the Catholic Church maintained the dogma of a common origin in Adam and Eve, many eighteenth-century scientists espoused the polygenist theory that blacks were a separate species from the rest of humanity. William Cohen explains how although "Christianity enforced the line between man and animal... ancient myths of man as half-animal, of animal as man, haunted the European imagination... The African could thus be depicted as animalistic, sexually lustful, lazy, and religiously unregenerate."¹¹²

For naturalists applying the monogenist theory, "climate theory was the secular rationale for various skin colors, behaviors, and abilities."¹¹³ Climate theory contended that certain environments, such as the temperate zones, were more conducive to the development of civilization and intellectual superiority. Because the climate of a human's place of origin determined the balance of their bodily humors, relocating to a different zone was believed to have a negative impact on health. White Europeans frequently made hypotheses on what would happen once the African became removed from his natural

¹¹¹ Quoted by Cohen, 10.

¹¹² Cohen, 34.

¹¹³ Roxanne Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: categories of difference in eighteenth-century British culture*, "New cultural studies" (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000) 21.

habitat in the tropical zone. In 1748, Peter Kalm made the following observation of African slaves in Pennsylvania and New England:

It has frequently been found, that the negroes cannot stand the cold here so well as the Europeans or the whites; for while the latter are not in the least bit affected by the cold, the toes and fingers of the former are frequently frozen...The frost easily hurts the hands or feet of the negroes who come from Africa, or occasions violent pains in their whole body, or in some parts of it, though it does not at all affect those who have been here for some time... Thus it is the same case with men here as with plants which are bought from the southern countries, before they accustom themselves to a colder climate.¹¹⁴

Kalm also expressed surprise that the coldness of the New England winters did not lighten the skin of the third and fourth generation slaves, observing how the only lightening of skin occurs when blacks had children with whites.

Meteorologic Medicine:

The King's physician, Jean-François Gaultier, subscribed to the developing theories of meteorologic medicine. This approach emphasized examining environmental factors of disease, such as wind direction, quality of water and soil, annual climate, and bodily reactions to the changing seasons.¹¹⁵ While meteorologic medicine did not explicitly examine the relationship between climate and race, it did suggest that a sudden change of geographic location could have detrimental effects on the body. Believing the cold dry winds of Canadian winter could cause pleurisy in an unseasoned body, Gaultier would have likely assumed Mathieu Léveillé's change of environment to be the sole culprit behind his multiple illnesses. Peter Kalm also wrote extensively on the importance of this seasoning process for African bodies in northern climates:

¹¹⁴ Kalm 207.

¹¹⁵ Stéphanie Tésio, "Climat et Médecine à Québec au Milieu du 18e Siècle," *Scientia Canadensis* 31, no. 1-2 (2008): 155-65.

Those who come immediately from Africa, cannot bear the cold so well as those who are either born in this country, or have been here for a considerable time...The negroes were formerly brought from Africa, as I mentioned before, but now this seldom happens, for they are bought in the West Indies, or American Islands, whither they were originally brought from their own country. It has been found that in transporting the negroes from Africa directly to these northern countries, they have not such good health as when they come gradually, by shorter stages.¹¹⁶

If these immigrations did not occur “gradually, by shorter stages,” eighteenth-century naturalists believed the journey could cause mechanical and pneumatic stresses to the body, resulting in melancholia.

In the early modern understanding of the term, “melancholia” referred to a physical condition caused by an excess of black bile, which in turn created symptoms of illness. Various types of melancholia included hypochondria and nostalgia. Nostalgia, “a pathological form of patriotic love,” included symptoms of fever, heart palpitations, anxiety, insomnia, loss of appetite, and a low tolerance for injustice.¹¹⁷ Forty years after Mathieu Lèveillé’s death, Francisco Berrera, a Spanish surgeon researching slave diseases in Cuba classified the “nostalgia of Negroes” with its own distinct definition: “a melancholic sadness that attacks them suddenly without delirium, furor or fever, born out of a strong aversion to anything that could distract them from their fantasies unless it is the return to their beloved patria.” Its triggers included “continuous impact of atmospheric hardships, new lifestyles, mistreatment, and personal offenses.”¹¹⁸ In describing the contributions of Barrera’s very astute observations, Adrián López Denis states, “he had developed an etiological model in which the effects of slavery came to be

¹¹⁶ Kalm, 207.

¹¹⁷ Adrián López Denis, “Melancholia, Slavery, and Racial Pathology in Eighteenth-Century Cuba,” *Science in Context* 18, no. 2 (2005): 179-199.

¹¹⁸ Quoted by Denis, 182-183.

considered more deleterious than the pathological influence of climate or the inherent predisposition of the African bodies to any particular form of illness.”¹¹⁹ Barrera’s conclusions on the effects of slave treatment suggest that many of Léveillé’s afflictions could have been attributed to his traumatic journey and multiple experiences of injustice.

The Attempted Cure:

According to Barrera, treatment for slave nostalgia included bloodletting, warm baths, purgatives, as well as more recreational therapies such as exercise, conversation, and amusement. While this analysis of the condition postdated Léveillé’s death by several decades, the actions taken by Hocquart to cure Léveillé nonetheless revealed some level of consciousness that his condition resulted from nostalgia, homesickness, and loneliness. Hocquart was convinced he could cure Léveillé’s loneliness by providing with him with “*une compagne*.” Although other executioners had received semi-arranged marriages with the *filles du roi* arriving from France, such a match was unfathomable for Mathieu Léveillé.¹²⁰ There being no eligible black women in New France, Hocquart supervised the purchase of a twenty-three year old West Indian slave named Angélique-Denise. Unfortunately when she arrived in 1742, Léveillé was once again confined in the Hôtel-Dieu. For fear that she could become infected by her fiancé, the two slaves were kept apart for over six months. On September 10, 1743, Mathieu Léveillé finally lost the

¹¹⁹ Denis, 191.

¹²⁰ By the early eighteenth century, mixed marriages between whites, Indians, and blacks had become socially unacceptable and banned by law. Although such matches were at one point condoned and even encouraged, colonial administrators of the 1720s and 1730s sought to maintain social order through the preservation of French blood. See Guillaume Aubert, “The Blood of France.”

battle for his life, and was buried in the pauper's cemetery.¹²¹ Angelique-Denise was baptized in December of that year.¹²² When Maurepas heard the news of the executioner's death, he wrote to Beauharnois and Hocquart informing them that it would be better to replace him with a free white. As for Angélique-Denise, Hocquart made arrangements for her to be sold for her purchase price.¹²³

The Effects of Slave Treatment on Health:

Assuming Hocquart was somewhat familiar with the prevailing theories on the relationship between climate and race, he would have likely believed Lèveillé's change of environment to be the sole culprit behind his multiple illnesses. However, by comparing Mathieu Lèveillé's experience to the experience of the Native American slaves of New France, it becomes evident that the European perceptions the relationships between climate and race, rather than the harshness of the climate itself, prevented the development of an African slave society in Canada.

Although Indian slaves were indigenous to the region and climate of New France, they experienced even greater health problems than the African slaves. Most of the Indian slaves arrived from areas far west of France's reach, having become the captives of rival Indian tribes and then sold to the French for the purpose of solidifying strategic

¹²¹ *Registre Journalier des Malades de l'Hôtel-Dieu de Québec*, ed. Marcel Fournier avec la collaboration du Programme de recherche en démographie historique de l'Université de Montréal (Longueuil: Productions Marcel Fournier, 1998).

¹²² Archives Judiciaires de Québec, Registres d'état civil, Notre-Dame de Québec, 23 décembre 1743.

¹²³ Lettre de Hocquart au Ministre, 9 octobre 1743, Fonds des Colonies, Série C11A, Correspondance Générale, Canada, vol. 79, fol. 343-343v, National Archives of Canada.

alliances.¹²⁴ While traded for diplomatic purposes, the French transformed the indigenous form of captive slavery into the more European model of purchasing the slaves for their labor. Because they could only be purchased as captives of just war, the French demand succeeded in perpetuating Indian violence in the West. The French thereafter considered the Panis slaves arriving in Montreal as property, not captives, and their harsh treatment of the slaves had disastrous consequences. Captured and sold as young children, nearly half of the Indian slaves died before age 14. Three-fourths never reached their twentieth birthday.¹²⁵

Brett Rushforth argues that previous historians of slavery in New France have all examined a few isolated examples of Indian slavery, depicting the institution as consisting of nurturing familiar relationships between masters and servants. By comparing Indian slavery to Caribbean slavery, and “finding no gang labor or staple crops, these historians have both denied the brutality inherent in New France’s slave system and minimized the accomplishments of slaves who successfully negotiated its demands.”¹²⁶ Though the Indian slaves may not have received the type of direct mistreatment seen in plantation slavery, their lack of adequate food, housing, and protection from disease led to extraordinarily high death rates. All slaves, both Indian and black, frequently ate aging or rotten food left over from the master’s kitchen. Forced to work from sunrise until the late evening hours, they had no time to form family relationships, and as a result the slave population failed to grow by natural increase. They received inadequate clothing for the winter months. In the instances of slave stealing

¹²⁴ Brett Rushforth, “Savage Bonds: Indian Slavery and Alliance in New France,” PhD dissertation, University of California Davis, 2003.

¹²⁵ Rushforth, 91

¹²⁶ Rushforth, 153.

from their masters, articles of clothing were the most commonly pilfered items. They slept on the floors of kitchens or outside in the courtyard, exposed to elements. Hospital records in Montreal and Quebec list hundreds of enslaved patients.¹²⁷ Considering how the Indian slaves fared even worse than their black peers, obviously it was not the climate alone that caused health problems and ‘melancholy.’

When Lèveillé entered the Hospital for the final his final stay in 1743, he may have interacted with two other black slaves who were also receiving care for their illnesses. Records from the Hotel-Dieu de Quebec document the stay of young black slave women named Louise who died on March 22, 1743 after receiving full sacraments. A few months later, 22 year-old slave named Joseph died of undocumented causes. Marcel Trudel’s *Dictionnaire Des Esclaves et de Leurs Propriétaires au Canada Français* provides more information on Josèph’s life, documenting his repeated hospitalizations in 1728, 1735, and 1740. He belonged to Charles Guillimin, a merchant and member of the Superior Council. In addition to Josèph, Guillimin also owned four Panis slaves who all made multiple visits to the Hôtel-Dieu.¹²⁸ Even though the Indian slaves were adapted to the climate of New France and had some exposure to European diseases, their living conditions and the treatment they received placed an extraordinary amount of strain on the body, limiting their ability to fight off illness. Rushforth explains how these environmental circumstances combined with “the psychological stress of enslavement,” leading to an overall weakness of health and short life expectancy.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Rushforth, 153-161.

¹²⁸ Marcel Trudel, *Dictionnaire des esclaves et de leur propriétaires au Canada Français*, CD-ROM (Quebec: Cahiers de Québec/Histoire. CD-ROM Hurtubise HMH, 2004) 42, 42, 128, 132, 341.

¹²⁹ Rushforth, 161.

Indians were technically more vulnerable to foreign disease while Africans possessed some antibodies. Meanwhile, Africans were considered to be less able to adapt to the cold weather of Canada while the Panis slaves would have been more accustomed to the northern climate. Despite these apparent physiological differences, life expectancies and rates of illness were similar among slaves of all races, leading to the conclusion that it was the treatment of the slaves, not their genetics, which had a greater impact on their overall health. In addition to these physical hardships, L  veill  's "melancholy" and loneliness indicates a possible pattern among the many other slaves who also arrived in New France and subsequently experienced the social death that so often accompanies the state of enslavement.

A Failed Experiment:

The circumstances of Mathieu L  veill  's death point to the main reasons as to why African slavery never fully established itself in Canadian society. Whenever a wealthy white merchant wanted to import a slave from the Caribbean, they had to weigh that desire against the huge financial risk that the slave might not live for very long. Slaving ships never arrived in Canada because they knew the demand did not exist, and because of the lack of willing investors, there were never enough black slaves to fuel a natural increase as seen in the American South. The colonial authorities' reaction to L  veill  's death points reveals their more general opinions about the purpose and utility of slavery in Canada. By suggesting they replace the slave executioner with a white man, Maurepas admitted to a failed experiment. Despite all the attempts to profit from

introducing the institution onto Canadian soil, slavery in New France never grew beyond its experimental phase.

CONCLUSION

The inability to adapt to life in New France, the bouts of serious illness, the lack of social acceptance, and premature death were all experiences shared by most of the slaves who left behind a historical record. Despite the small numbers, the existence of this slave population still had consequences for the racial ideology of New France. The story of Mathieu Léveillé demonstrates how even in a colony where African slavery never became the basis of the economy or culture, the fundamental characteristics of slavery were still fully understood and accepted. In Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and North America, slavery spread its tentacles throughout diverse spheres of public and private life, eventually finding its way into some of the most distant outposts of empires. Merchants, nobles, and officials actively encouraged these connections, discovering new methods of exploiting forced labor.

This thesis took a microhistoric approach while placing the case study in a wider Atlantic context. While the aims and methods of microhistory and Atlantic history may appear to be in complete opposition, Laura Putnam identifies three areas where the two methods are coterminous. One exists in the role of the “telling example” that proves the existence of a denied coherence across geographic lines. A second overlap is found in prosopographical studies of groups crossing the Atlantic. The third way is through Atlantic history’s reliance on the microhistory, using it “to determine on a case-by-case basis which places should be part of their frame of reference, and then decide... which

sites can be part of their frame of study.”¹³⁰ For this paper, Mathieu L  veill   served as the ideal case study because he provided an opportunity for confining the area of study to the history of African slavery in New France while still permitting occasions to discuss the contextual experiences of Indian slavery, the judicial system in Quebec, and eighteenth-century attitudes towards medicine and race. Laurent Dubois discusses the usefulness of the Atlantic approach to bring together formerly fragmented regional histories, including forgotten realms into a greater narrative arch. Applying an Atlantic approach to the Canadian history, in particular, allows new opportunities for discovering connections and themes in a history that “has been focused primarily on exploring the distinct history of this area within North America.”¹³¹

Because Canadian slavery differed from slavery throughout the rest of the Atlantic world in both degree and method, historians will experience difficulty in attempting to gauge its severity in comparison to more established slave societies. But as Mathieu L  veill  ’s experience has shown, any relative mildness of slavery in New France cannot be attributed to the familial bonds between masters and slaves, the strong presence of the Catholic Church, or even to the effects of the climate on development and agriculture (although climate did contribute to the low rates of importation). Slavery was most severe and damaging in regions where large populations of slaves became highly concentrated, growing through natural increase. In these regions, mainly in the Caribbean and in the American South, rates of manumission and intermarriage were lower than their Latin American counterparts. Slavery in Canada always functioned on an extremely

¹³⁰ Putnam, 616, 621.

¹³¹ Laurent Dubois, “The French Atlantic,” in *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal*, eds. Jack P. Green and Philip D. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 146.

limited scale, preventing its development into the form of racist slavery seen in other parts of the French Atlantic. Receiving a slow trickle of human chattel from the Caribbean, Quebec was an outpost, rather than a hub, of the transatlantic slave trade. Mathieu Léveillé's experience nonetheless demonstrates how the attitudes expressed towards these slaves were consistent with other slave societies.

While historians cannot justifiably compare the type of slavery in Canada to its institutionalized form on the Caribbean plantation, recounting Léveillé's story opens the door to explore other types of contributions. Léveillé's importation proves an awareness and acceptance of Caribbean slavery among the elites of New France. These elites then used this knowledge and ideology to reinforce and justify the enslavement of Indians, who in turn became classified as slaves by their race, rather than by their captive status. An analysis of the reasons for importing Mathieu Léveillé also uncovers early Canadian attitudes opinions towards crime and punishment. Because the people of Quebec City stigmatized the executioner as immoral, impure, and maligned, Léveillé was the perfect candidate due to his innate marginalization as a slave and a foreigner. His treatment at the Hôtel-Dieu offers a window for discussing eighteenth-century beliefs on the relationship between climate, race, and the body. Most importantly, the story of Mathieu Léveillé serves as an avenue for exploring the intercolonial interactions between black slaves and other marginalized peoples throughout the French Atlantic.

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