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The *Gérants* of Eighteenth-Century Saint-Domingue: From Plantation Managers to Hidden Economy Smugglers

Mathilde Ackermann-Koenigs

History, Bielefeld University, Germany
Email: mackermann@uni-bielefeld.de

Abstract

Gérants—plantation managers in eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue—occupied a unique position as indispensable intermediaries and agents of a thriving hidden economy. Responsible for overseeing enslaved labour and maximising plantation productivity, they operated within the tensions of absentee ownership and the structural contradictions of the colonial economy. The cases of Binet and Arnaudeau, two *gérants* under absentee landlords, reveal how their autonomy facilitated fraudulent practices and illicit trade. These activities, driven by economic necessity and personal ambition, expose the complex interplay of trust, delegation, and exploitation at the heart of plantation life. By bringing these hidden economies to light, the role of the *gérant* emerges as central to both the economic prosperity of Saint-Domingue and the broader dynamics of colonial slavery and economic history.

Keywords: hidden economies; slavery; Saint-Domingue; French colonial history; Haiti

In the eighteenth century, the French colony of Saint-Domingue stood as the wealthiest and one of the most productive colonies in the Atlantic world.¹ Known as an economic giant, it accounts for 40 per cent of global sugar production and 60 per cent of coffee, in addition to significant quantities of coca, cotton, and indigo.² It also played a pivotal role in the larger networks of Atlantic capitalism, which include both legal trade and contraband.³ While Saint-Domingue's success in the colonial economy has been widely attributed to its reliance on enslaved labour, less attention has been paid to the hidden economy that flourished alongside it. The hidden economy, encompassing “all activities outside the regulating framework of the state,” such as smuggling and theft, was not merely a threat to

¹ Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 1.

² Jean-Louis Donnadieu, “Dans la colonie escalvagiste française de Saint-Domingue au XVIII^e siècle: une ségrégation complexe,” *Bulletin de la Société d'histoire de la Guadeloupe*, no. 164 (January–April 2013), 57. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1036802ar>.

³ John Garrigus, “Blue and Brown: Contraband Indigo and the Rise of a Free Colored Planter Class in French Saint-Domingue,” *The Americas* 50:2 (1993), 233–63.

the colony's wealth but an integral part of its functioning.⁴ Although the details of colonial smuggling remain unevenly explored, one figure situated between the plantation and the black-market warrants closer attention: the *gérant* of Saint-Domingue.⁵ Responsible for managing finances and overseeing both free and enslaved labourers, they played a crucial role on eighteenth-century French plantations. Their managerial position offers valuable insights into the connections linking plantation economies to informal trade networks.

Recent historiographical attention to the “invisible” intermediaries of history has revived debates about the role of plantation managers in the United States. This topic expands on previous conversations about their involvement in the daily functioning of plantations and their possible impact on broader economic transformations, such as the emergence of capitalist production. Some economists and historians have long argued that plantation managers served as early precursors of capitalist production modes, laying the groundwork for the factory systems dominating the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁶ However, while the idea of a “transfer of managerialism from the plantation fields to the manufacture” remains debated in the United States,⁷ the influence of plantation economies on industrial practices in France appears even less likely.

Despite a growing body of research on American plantation managers, their counterparts in the French colonies remain primarily unknown.⁸ Yet *gérants* are often mentioned only in passing and rarely positioned as central figures in plantation studies.⁹ This relative neglect is surprising given the critical role plantation production played in sustaining the region's economy, both legally and illicitly.¹⁰ Studies of Caribbean smuggling and

⁴ Ozan Hatipoglu, “Informal Sector,” in *Encyclopedia of Law and Economics*, ed. Alain Marciano and Giovanni Ramello (New York: Springer, 2019), 1130–9, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-7753-2_300080.

⁵ Alan L. Karras, *Smuggling: Contraband and Corruption in World History*, Exploring World History (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010); Wim Klooster, “L'hydre de la contrebande aux Antilles (XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles),” *Outre-Terre* 51:2 (2017), 331–9; Philippe Hrodej, “Les formes du commerce malouin aux Antilles (1680–1700). Le sucre et l'interlope,” in *Horizons Atlantiques: villes, négoce, pouvoirs*, ed. Martine Acerra and Bernard Michon (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2019), 329–36.

⁶ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 3rd ed. (1944; repr., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021). For discussions on slavery and capitalism, see Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1939); Bill Cooke, “The Denial of Slavery in Management Studies,” *Journal of Management Studies* 40:8 (6 November 2003), 1895–918; John J. Clegg, “Capitalism and Slavery,” *Critical Historical Studies* 2:2 (1 September 2015), 281–304; Paul Cheney, “Le plantation complexe moderne à Saint-Domingue: un débat inachevé,” in *Travail servile et dynamiques économiques XVIe–XXe Siècle*, ed. Anne Conchon, Myriam Cottias, and Alessandro Stanziani (Vincennes: Institut de la gestion publique et du développement économique, 2024), 97–116, <https://doi.org/10.4000/12n93>.

⁷ Cooke, “The Denial of Slavery in Management Studies,” 1907.

⁸ See Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019); Tristan Stubbs, *Masters of Violence: The Plantation Overseers of Eighteenth-Century Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018); Laura Sandy, *The Overseers of Early American Slavery: Supervisors, Enslaved Labourers, and the Plantation Enterprise* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

⁹ See Jean-Louis Donnadieu, *Un grand seigneur et ses esclaves: Le comte de Noé entre Antilles et Gascogne, 1728–1816* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Midi, 2009); Paul Cheney, *Cul de Sac: Patrimony, Capitalism, and Slavery in French Saint-Domingue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

¹⁰ Scholarly publications on the colonial history of Saint-Domingue have primarily focused on biographies of slave-owning families and the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804). For the Haitian Revolution see David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering, *The World of the Haitian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Malick W. Ghachem, *The Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Alex Dupuy, *Rethinking the Haitian Revolution: Slavery, Independence, and the Struggle for Recognition* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019). On the daily life of the enslaved, see Dominique Rogers, *Voix d'esclaves: Antilles, Guyane et Louisiane françaises, XVIIIe–XIXe siècles* (Paris: Karthala; Paris: CIRESC; Paris: SAA, 2015), <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb44431213g>; Philippe Hrodej, ed., *L'esclave et les plantations: de l'établissement de la servitude à son abolition. Hommage à Pierre Pluchon* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008); Laura Sandy, “Supervisors of Small Worlds: The Role of Overseers on Colonial South Carolina Slave Plantations,” *Journal of Early American History* 2:2 (2012), 178–210,

contraband have demonstrated how deeply these practices were embedded in the colonial economy, with research on the French Caribbean further highlighting their prevalence during periods of conflict.¹¹ Yet, specific investigations into Saint-Domingue's involvement in these networks remain scarce despite the colony's significant role in the Atlantic economy.¹² This historiographical gap underscores the need to examine the *gérants* as intermediaries whose management of plantation production linked it directly to the hidden economy. The *gérants* of Saint-Domingue occupied a unique and often precarious space within the plantation economy. Entrusted with overseeing plantation operations on behalf of absentee owners, they operated at the intersection of legal and illicit activities, where autonomy is often translated into opportunity. This study explores how *gérants* leveraged the asymmetry of information and the geographic distance from their employers to consolidate power and engage in practices that blurred the boundaries of legality. Far from being isolated, these activities contributed to a broader hidden economy that underpinned plantation productivity and the colonial system's prosperity.

To investigate this paradoxical role, the study draws on various archival materials, including letters, financial records, and administrative reports. Among the most revealing are the correspondences between the Fleuriau and Brossard de la Poupardière families in France and their *gérants* in Saint-Domingue. These exchanges offer a rare glimpse into the daily negotiations and tensions that defined the relationship between absentee owners and the intermediaries who managed their estates, exposing the fragility and adaptability of plantation hierarchies. These activities were far from isolated; instead, they were deeply intertwined with a hidden economy that not only supported the productivity of plantations but also contributed to the colonial system's prosperity. By situating the *gérants* within the context of the Atlantic economy and colonial hierarchies, this study sheds light on the dynamics that shaped one of the most profitable plantation systems of the eighteenth century.

Caribbean Smuggling and Plantation Management

The economic dynamics of Saint-Domingue in the late eighteenth century were defined by both extraordinary wealth and systemic contradictions. The colony's production far exceeded the capacities of legal trade under the *exclusif*, the French mercantilist policy that restricted colonial commerce to exchanges with the metropole.¹³ While this system enriched French merchants and maintained the colonial hierarchy, it created severe bottlenecks in the local economy, leaving planters and plantation managers with surplus goods that could not be sold legally. This imbalance provided fertile ground for developing a hidden economy, as surplus sugar, coffee, and indigo were smuggled to foreign markets in exchange for scarce or expensive goods through official channels.¹⁴ Yet such hidden economies generated profits and played a significant role in the wealth and success of Saint-Domingue. For instance, in 1789, the export of goods from the island was approximately

<https://doi.org/10.1163/187707012X649585>; Frédéric Régent, *Les maîtres de la Guadeloupe: propriétaires d'esclaves, 1635–1848* (Paris: Tallandier, 2019).

¹¹ Wim Klooster, "Inter-Imperial Smuggling in the Americas, 1600–1800," in *Soundings in Atlantic History: Latent Structures and Intellectual Currents, 1500–1830*, ed. Bernard Baylin and Patricia L. Denault (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 141–80, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674053533-005>. See also Wim Klooster, "L'hydre de la contrebande aux Antilles (XVII^e–XVIII^e siècles)," *Outre-Terre* 51:2 (25 October 2017), 331–9, <https://doi.org/10.3917/outel.051.0331>; Wim Klooster, *Illicit Riches: Dutch Trade in the Caribbean, 1648–1795* (Leiden: KITLV, 1998);

¹² See Garrigus, "Blue and Brown."

¹³ See Jean Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l'Ancien Régime: l'évolution du régime de "l'Exclusif" de 1763 à 1789*, vol. 2 (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1972).

¹⁴ See Klooster, "Inter-Imperial Smuggling"; Garrigus, "Blue and Brown."

161 million francs, while the estimated amount of illicit trade was around 17 million francs, representing 10 per cent of the colony's trade.¹⁵ In a summary table of exports from Saint-Domingue, it is stated that "it is well known that smuggling in Saint-Domingue, especially in 1789, took almost all the cotton and indigo from Artibonite and exported them to Jamaica."¹⁶

As Garrigus notes, "Throughout the eighteenth century, indigo brought an international smuggling network to Saint-Domingue's southern coast," underscoring how these clandestine activities became deeply embedded in the colony's economy.¹⁷ This embeddedness is further illustrated in the demographic distribution of plantation managers. According to the 1788 census, the south of Saint-Domingue hosted a significantly higher number of *gérants* and *économés* (bursar) than the north, with 797 *gérants* and 1,244 *économés* in the south compared to 472 *gérants* and 588 *économés* in the north.¹⁸ This disparity highlights the south's prominence in smuggling networks and its reliance on skilled intermediaries to navigate the demands of plantation management alongside the opportunities presented by contraband. Positioned between absentee owners and enslaved labourers, *gérants* and *économés* in the south were likely key actors in facilitating the movement of surplus goods to clandestine markets, leveraging their proximity to production sites and the flexibility afforded by their roles.

The position of *gérants* as intermediaries within the plantation hierarchy was crucial to their ability to participate in the hidden economy. Situated between absentee planters in France and the enslaved labourers under their management, *gérants* operated with significant autonomy in the daily operations of the plantation. This autonomy was amplified by the physical and administrative distance from their employers, allowing them to exercise control over production outputs and logistical arrangements with minimal oversight. As scholar Van den Eeckhout demonstrates, the position of foremen occupied a "middle range of discretion" that granted them a relative autonomy vis-à-vis both employers and workers. This ambiguous status, neither fully subordinate nor entirely managerial, created a grey zone of accountability in which managers like *gérants* could navigate between official responsibilities and illicit practices, blending technical expertise with personal initiative.¹⁹

Their dual position, bound to the planters yet embedded in local contexts, provided *gérants* with unique opportunities to exploit the plantation system for personal or unofficial gains. Garrigus highlights how intermediaries in Saint-Domingue were often the first point of contact for foreign traders operating outside the legal framework of the *exclusif*. By controlling access to surplus goods and negotiating their sales, *gérants* became indispensable figures in smuggling networks, leveraging their knowledge of plantation inventories and local markets to navigate the hidden economy effectively.²⁰

The absence of planters from the colonies further enhanced the *gérants*' capacity to engage in these activities. As described in *Supervisors and Authority*, the lack of direct oversight created "an asymmetry of information" that empowered managers to make decisions unchallenged, particularly in remote regions such as the southern coast of Saint-Domingue. This asymmetry not only facilitated routine plantation management but also provided the

¹⁵ Antoine Dalmas, *Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue: Depuis le commencement des troubles jusqu'à la prise de Jérémie* (Paris: Mame frères, 1814), 294.

¹⁶ Alexandre Paul Marie de Laujon, *Moyen de rentrer en possession de la colonie de St-Domingue et d'y établir la tranquillité* (Paris: A. Égron, 1814), 91. All translations in this paper are the author's own.

¹⁷ Garrigus, "Blue and Brown," 237.

¹⁸ "Saint-Domingue recensement de la population de 1630 à 1788," code 5 DPPC 63. Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (ANOM), Aix-en-Provence, France.

¹⁹ Patricia Van den Eeckhout, "Secrets, Lies and Contracts: Conflicts between Employers and Their Foremen in Nineteenth-Century Ghent (1885–1913)," in *Supervision and Authority in Industry: Western European Experiences, 1830–1939*, ed. Patricia Van den Eeckhout (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), 83–108, 88

²⁰ Garrigus, "Blue and Brown," 120.

latitude for *gérants* to establish and maintain connections with illicit traders.²¹ Garrigus adds that in regions dominated by contraband, like Saint-Domingue's southern coast, intermediaries frequently acted as brokers between plantation surpluses and international markets, ensuring the flow of goods beyond official channels.²² Among these intermediaries, *gérants* thrived as brokers, leveraging their autonomy—afforded by the absenteeism of plantation owners—to manage daily operations and navigate opportunities in both legal and illicit trade.

Delegated Power: Absenteeism and the Rise of the *Gérants*

Jean-Jacques Brossard de la Poupardière and Aimé-Benjamin Fleuriau were two slave owners who, after making their fortune, decided to leave Saint-Domingue to return to France. These two planters, in their destinies and successes, exemplify the path taken by many French families who made a name for themselves in the West Indies. Their respective long-distance relationships with their *gérants* after their departure allow us to observe the practices of absenteeism and the establishment of legal and communication structures in Saint-Domingue.

Jean-Jacques Brossard de la Poupardière seems to have been one of the colonists forgotten by the world despite his status among his contemporaries and his economic success. In a memoir published in 1738, Brossard de la Poupardière states that he settled in Saint-Domingue at the age of seventeen or eighteen and quickly developed several plantations of “some consequence.”²³ The total value of Brossard de la Poupardière's properties in Saint-Domingue was estimated at 1,332,000 francs in 1828.²⁴ Yet, his return to France proved difficult, as he chose to establish a sugar refinery and a cotton textile factory in the city of Le Havre, Normandy, where his Protestant faith prevented him from settling for several years due to the region's predominantly Catholic population.²⁵ Only with the help of his contacts, such as M. Derchigny, an intendant of the navy in Le Havre, was he able to carry out his enterprise successfully.²⁶ Derchigny noted, “This merchant, who is known in Cap-Français, the island of Saint-Domingue, holds assets of 600,000 pounds in Negroes and in houses and makes considerable trade there.”²⁷ After his departure, he left one of his plantations, which was located near the city of Cap-Français, in the hands of his *gérant*, M. Binet, and an *économe* (bursar), M. Sollicoffre.²⁸

²¹ Van den Eeckhout, “Secrets, Lies and Contracts”, 93.

²² Garrigus, “Blue and Brown,” 25.

²³ “Brossard de La Poupardière, natif d'Aunis, établi à Saint-Domingue,” 1738, Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer [ANOM], COL E 53, fol. 5.

²⁴ According to the book *Etats détaillés des indemnités* which lists the names and number of properties that belonged to the expropriated colonists after the recognition of Haiti's independence in 1825, the Brossard de la Poupardière family, represented by Charles Brossard des Plantes and Jeanne Brossard de la Poupardière, legitimate children of Jean-Jacques Brossard de la Poupardière, owned a sugar plantation in Petite-Anse, a coffee plantation in Grande-Rivière, and a house in the city of Cap-Français. For more information, see the CNRS and CIRESC co-financed website www.esclavage-indemnitees.fr.

²⁵ During the mid-eighteenth century, Protestantism faced significant restrictions and discrimination in France due to the government's anti-Protestant policies and the predominance of Catholicism. For more information see Patrick Cabanel, *Histoire des protestants en France: XVIe–XXIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2012).

²⁶ Louis-Stanislas-Aimon Borély, *Histoire de la ville du Havre et de son ancien gouvernement*, vol. 3, 5 vol. (Le Havre: Lepelletier, 1880), 307.

²⁷ Letter from Mr Derchigny accompanying the memorandum of Jean-Jacques Brossard de la Poupardière, April 23, 1738, ANOM, COL E 53, fol. 2.

²⁸ Based on the correspondence of Mr Brossard de la Poupadière, the name of the *gérant* was spelt as Sollicoffre. However, it is believed that this was a typographical error made by the author. This is because the Brossard family had a business relationship with the Zollikofer family, a Swiss family that settled permanently in the Antilles.

Aimé-Benjamin Fleuriau (1709–1787) had a similar background. The two men even originated from the same city, La Rochelle. François Fleuriau, Aimé-Benjamin's father, was a refiner who went bankrupt in 1729, leaving his two children with unpayable debts. As a result, at the age of twenty, Aimé-Benjamin, the elder son, decided to try and make his fortune in Saint-Domingue, where his uncle owned a plantation. By 1747, Aimé-Benjamin was in a position to buy the Bellevue plantation in the parish of La Croix-des-Bouquets from Mr Mathieu.²⁹ Less than ten years later, this had become one of the most important plantations in the region. After assuring the financial success of his enterprise, Aimé-Benjamin decided in 1755 to return to France. Aimé-Benjamin's policy was to keep his property within his family network. Hence, when he left Saint-Domingue, he placed his plantation in the care of a distant cousin on his mother's side, Jacques Raseteau, who became his *gérant*.³⁰ Four years into his stewardship, Pierre Raseteau passed away in 1776, reportedly poisoned by enslaved domestics.³¹ His replacement was Jean-Baptiste Arnaudeau, another distant cousin, who had been living on the plantation since 1775 and ran it until its final loss in 1804 with the proclamation of Haiti's independence.

By settling in La Rochelle and Le Havre as wealthy planters from Saint-Domingue, the Fleuriau and Brossard de la Poupardière families permanently changed the landscape of their respective cities.³² Their return to France was facilitated by legal and communication structures that enabled absentee owners to maintain a presence in colonies like Saint-Domingue, where the number of absentee owners exceeded that of those who resided on the island.³³ Thus, the role of the *gérant* changed; he was no longer a simple "helper" for the master but became the embodiment of the owner's power over his property.

The employment of *blancs à gage*, French men working on the plantations for low wages, made it possible for these owners to return to France. Contemporaries, like modern scholars, were almost unanimous in perceiving owner absenteeism to be a "disengagement from all activity" or even a "flight from work" in favour of a life of luxury, leisure, and idleness.³⁴ A travelogue about Saint-Domingue, published in 1797, contains a passage by Alexandre-Stanislas de Wimpffen who states that "out of ten Europeans who settle in Saint-Domingue, at least seven will return to their homeland as soon as they believe they can live there comfortably. Those whose characters or tastes are so repugnant to colonial manners as to

²⁹ According to the indemnity request documents, Aimé-Benjamin allegedly bought the Bellevue plantation in 1747 from a Mr Mathieu, whose first name and other additional information are unknown, see: "Indemnisation des biens Fleuriau situés à Saint-Domingue en vertu de la loi du 30 avril et de l'ordonnance royale du 9 mai 1826," 1826, Archives départementales de la Gironde [ADG], 61 J 41/3, fol. 61.

³⁰ According to research by historian Jacques de Cauna, Aimé-Benjamin Fleuriau initially left his plantation to his cousin Jacques Chamois, who decided to return to France ten years later in 1765. The plantation was then managed by Jean-Baptiste Renard until 1772 before being taken over by Pierre Raseteau, a first cousin of Aimé-Benjamin, until his death in 1776. See Jacques de Cauna, *Au temps des îles à sucre: histoire d'une plantation de Saint-Domingue au XVIII^e siècle, hommes et sociétés* (Paris: Karthala, 2003), 59–61.

³¹ The information regarding the death of Pierre Raseteau is limited. It is only mentioned in a letter from a neighbour of the Fleuriau family, which states that three enslaved individuals attempted to poison the family's attorney, Mr Leremboure, and claimed during their arrestation responsibility for the death of the *gérant*. It is likely that these allegations were simply a display of power meant to instil fear within the enslaved community. See *ibid.*, 61.

³² About Aimé-Benjamin Fleuriau, see Jacques de Cauna, *Fleuriau, La Rochelle et l'esclavage: trente-cinq ans de mémoire et d'histoire* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2017).

³³ Lowell Joseph Ragatz also showed a similar case for the British colonies, but he did not mention the importance of the *gérants* in the system of representation in the colony. See Lowell Joseph Ragatz, "Absentee Landlordism in the British Caribbean, 1750–1833," *Agricultural History* 5:1 (1931), 7–24.

³⁴ Caroline Oudin-Bastide, *Travail, capitalisme et société esclavagiste: Guadeloupe, Martinique (XVII^e–XIX^e siècle)* (Paris: Découverte, 2005), 55.

desire to have nothing more in common with the colonies.”³⁵ This widespread absenteeism not only shaped perceptions of the planter class but also redefined the structure of plantation management in Saint-Domingue. With owners departing for metropolitan France, the responsibility for maintaining plantation operations fell increasingly to *gérants* and other managerial figures. These intermediaries became the physical embodiment of the owner’s authority, navigating the delicate balance between enforcing the master’s will and adapting to the realities of colonial life. The absence of direct oversight created a space where *gérants* could exercise considerable autonomy, a condition that would later prove pivotal in their integration into the hidden economy.

“Men without a Life of Their Own”: From Marginalised Colonists to Plantation Managers

The variety of terms used in French Saint-Domingue—*gérants*, *régisseurs*, and *économés*—highlights the fluid and often imprecise nature of plantation management terminology.³⁶ Frequently appearing in archival records, these titles were sometimes used interchangeably, blurring the distinctions between their respective responsibilities. This variation reflects not only the inherent complexity of plantation management but also the adaptability of these roles to the specific needs and structures of individual estates. Understanding the role of the *gérant* is essential to grasping the unique position they occupy within the plantation economy. The *Dictionnaire Universel du Commerce* defines the *gérant* as “A name referring particularly to the person in charge of the economy of a plantation and the government of the Negroes in the French colonies.”³⁷ This definition firmly places the *gérant* within the context of slavery, emphasising their financial responsibilities even before their role in managing the enslaved population. According to Tristan Stubbs, overseers—the American equivalent of the *gérants*—were “faced with twin responsibilities for economic success and societal order.”³⁸ The *contra mayors* in Spanish colonies fulfilled a similar role. In French, British, and Spanish colonies, therefore, the stewardship of the plantations was linked to a colonial practice of slavery. However, as the French settler Ducoeurjoly stated in his *Manuel des habitants de Saint-Domingue*, “The *gérant* is a person chosen and appointed by the owner to represent him on his estate,” implying that the landlord’s absence was an integral aspect of plantation administration in Saint-Domingue.³⁹ The search for suitable candidates was a primary concern for plantation owners, prompting the creation of numerous manuals offering detailed advice on selecting a *gérant*. These texts not only guided recruitment practices but also provided valuable insights into the expectations, responsibilities, and daily realities of the *gérant*’s role within the plantation system.

Recruitment could go both ways, with a landlord who was leaving the island or a *gérant* who was looking for a job both being able to advertise in the local newspapers.⁴⁰ However, as was customary in the eighteenth century, management was rarely entrusted to a stranger

³⁵ Alexandre-Stanislas de Wimpffen, *Voyage à Saint-Domingue pendant les années 1788, 1789, 1790*, vol. 2 (Paris: Cocheris, 1797), 154.

³⁶ In eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue, the term *régisseur* could be synonymous with *gérant*. However, it could also designate a position that combined the roles of both *gérant* and *économe*.

³⁷ *Dictionnaire universel de commerce, banque, manufactures, douanes, pêche*, vol. 1, s.v. “*gérant*”, (Paris: Buisson, 1805), 741.

³⁸ Stubbs, *Masters of Violence*, 2.

³⁹ Stanislas-Joseph Ducoeurjoly, *Manuel des habitants de Saint-Domingue: contenant un précis de l’histoire de cette île, depuis sa découverte*, vol. 1 (Paris: Arthus Bertrand, 1803), 63.

⁴⁰ Charles-Théodore Mozard, *Gazette de Saint-Domingue: Politique, civile, économique et littéraire. Affiches, annonces et avis divers* (Port-au-Prince: l’Imprimerie de Mozard, 1791), 95.

to the plantation. Instead, *placement*—the practice of using social or family connections to secure positions—remained the most common method.⁴¹ For instance, Madame Fleuriau tried to place her cousin on the Fleuriau plantation in Saint-Domingue, a move met with scepticism by the *gérant*, Jean-Baptiste Arnaudeau, who doubted the cousin's experience and competence.⁴² The position of *gérant* was highly coveted not only for the authority it granted but also for the social status it conferred. Ducoeurjoly observed that the role brought significant prestige, but he also noted that reputation was essential for securing such a position.⁴³

The initial step in this process involved determining the type of individual suitable for this kind of employment. Alexandre de Wimpffen advised planters not to nominate their *gérant* from among their peers: "If you take him from the class of your equals, that is to say, among the class of property owners, his own affairs will only allow him to give yours very superficial attention."⁴⁴ The selection of a *gérant* was not a mere formality but a cornerstone of plantation administration. As Alexandre de Wimpffen emphasised, the ideal *gérant* needed to devote himself entirely to the owner's estate, free from distractions such as personal wealth or property. This requirement effectively excluded *grands planteurs* (wealthy planters) and rooted the role of the *gérant* within the socio-economic category of the *petits blancs* (poor whites). Tasked with overseeing the plantation's economy, labour force, and daily operations, the *gérant* functioned as an indispensable intermediary in a system reliant on absentee ownership. In Saint-Domingue, only a third of plantation owners lived on the island, while the remaining two-thirds relied on *gérants* to manage their estates.⁴⁵

Despite their crucial responsibilities, they had a particularly negative reputation, and defenders and detractors of slavery alike were unanimous in their view of the *petits blancs*: "They are men without a life of their own, who sometimes fled from Europe because of their crimes, and who, thanks to their white skin, were astonished to find under the skies of the West Indies the consideration they no longer deserved. The generic term 'petits blancs' was used to describe all these individuals."⁴⁶ This perception closely mirrors the experience of American overseers, who, as Tristan Stubbs observes, "might be given wages, food, and lodging, but with them he received prejudice, mistrust, and dishonour."⁴⁷ Both groups occupied a paradoxical position: indispensable to the functioning of the plantation system yet marginalised within the broader colonial hierarchy.

This did not diminish the desire or necessity of acquiring such a position, and such a position was not easily acquired. One usually becomes a *gérant* only after years of work on the plantation as an *économe* and after gaining the owner's confidence. Charles Marie François Malenfant, always referred to as Colonel Malenfant,⁴⁸ is one of the few contemporaries to speak out about this upwardly mobile mentality and the ambition of white plantation

⁴¹ On the relationship between trade and trust in the modern period see Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012); Guillaume Calafat, "Diasporas marchandes et commerce interculturel: Familles, réseaux et confiance dans l'économie de l'époque moderne," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 66:2 (2011), 513–31.

⁴² Letter of Jean-Baptiste Arnaudeau to Madame Fleuriau, 1788, ADG, 61 J 40, fol. 255.

⁴³ Ducoeurjoly, *Manuel des habitants*, 63.

⁴⁴ Wimpffen, *Voyage à Saint-Domingue*, vol. 2, 155.

⁴⁵ Charles Frostin, *Les révoltes blanches à Saint-Domingue aux xvii^e et xviii^e siècles* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008), ePub, "La contestation insulaire," <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pur.4103>.

⁴⁶ Pamphile de Lacroix, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue*, vol. 1 (Paris: Pillet aîné, 1819), 21–2.

⁴⁷ Stubbs, *Masters of Violence*, 35.

⁴⁸ Charles Marie François Malenfant was a colonel who lived for several years on a plantation in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He wrote *Des colonies et particulièrement de celle de Saint-Domingue: Mémoire historique et politique* (Paris: Audibert, 1814) after the restoration of slavery in 1802 by Napoleon Bonaparte, and his work focused on the issues surrounding slavery and colonial life. Beyond his

workers. He criticises their mindset: “The *économe* wants to become a *gérant*; the *gérant*, a *procureur* [attorney]; the latter wants to earn the trust of his owner, to make more income than the one he replaced, and thus to earn the reputation of a great planter.”⁴⁹ For the *petits blancs*, becoming a *gérant* was one of the most viable paths to acquiring wealth and eventually achieving property ownership. The position not only offered steady wages but also provided experience in plantation management and access to networks of influence, both of which were crucial for aspiring landowners. This professional trajectory highlights how the *gérants* balanced their roles as employees with long-term personal ambitions, using the plantation system as a platform for social mobility.

Regarding the remuneration of *gérants*, determining an accurate estimate of their average annual salary is a challenging task. However, it is widely acknowledged that plantation overseers were compensated on a commission basis, which entailed receiving a percentage of the plantation’s profits based on their performance.⁵⁰ Colonel Malenfant mentions an annual salary ranging between 400 and 500 pounds, while Jean-Jacques de la Poupardière claims to pay Mr Binet, his *gérant*, between 1,000 and 1,500 pounds monthly. As for Jean-Baptiste Arnaudeau, the Fleuriau family paid him 800 pounds during his time as an *économe*; his salary was certainly higher when he became the *gérant*.⁵¹ The salary inevitably varied according to numerous factors, such as the plantation’s size, the specific remuneration offered by the owners, and the manager’s skills. Consequently, the *gérants* were paid as much as qualified workers in France during the late eighteenth century, and their annual salaries ranged between 300 and 1,000 pounds.

The accounts of the Foäche family further illustrate this variability. For example, Ladouay, the *gérant* of the Santo plantation, earned a substantial 12,000 pounds annually, while Seignoret, the *procureur* of the same estate, received 20,000 pounds. However, not all *gérants* were so highly compensated. Gauvain, the *gérant* of the Trou plantation, earned only 545 pounds in a year.⁵² These disparities suggest that a *gérant*’s earnings were closely tied to the profitability of the plantation they managed and to the specific terms negotiated with their employers. Therefore, while *gérants* were compensated similarly to skilled workers, their role as heads of the plantation suggests that their salaries may not always have been commensurate with the level of responsibility and complexity their duties entailed.

In addition to their salary, the *gérants* had access to other benefits, such as using the owner’s house and even the servants. Indeed, his installation in the master’s house after the owner’s departure was not an insignificant act. With this installation, a *gérant* visually asserted power in the plantation space, as the house was generally located at the top of a hill, visible to all and seemingly omniscient.⁵³ Thus, the move from an annexe to the owner’s house gave the *gérant* legitimacy in his management.

This visible assertion of authority contrasts sharply with Malenfant’s sarcastic depiction of *gérants* as idle and detached from the realities of plantation life. Malenfant remarked that *gérants* “took care of the accounting and correspondence” but spent most of their time at leisure, contrasting this with the six days a week enslaved workers toiled from dawn

military title and involvement in plantation life, little is known about his personal life or other aspects of his career.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 158.

⁵⁰ Wimpffen, *Voyage*, vol. 2, 156.

⁵¹ Malenfant, *Des colonies*, 162; Letter of J.-J. Brossard de la Poupardière to his mother, 1724, Archives Nationales [AN], 661AP/10/R/136; Cauna, *Au temps des isles*, 73.

⁵² Stéphanie Joachim, “Les Foäche, une dynastie d’armateurs et de planteurs entre Le Havre et Saint-Domingue aux XVIII^e–XIX^e siècles” (thèse de doctorat, Université des Antilles, 2023).

⁵³ Wilkins Andrew Philip, “Tactics, Strategies, Spaces, and Places: The Spatial Constructions of Race and Class on Virginia Plantations” (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 2017), 399.

to dusk.⁵⁴ However, an examination of the sources reveals a starkly different reality: the *gérants*' responsibilities were not only multifaceted and intricate but also demanding, contradicting Malenfant's depiction of their role as one of ease and leisure. This complexity of the *gérant*'s duties, as outlined in contemporary sources, finds further validation in official regulations.

The ordinance of 3 December 1784, addressing *procureurs* and *économés-gérants*, required that "every *procureur* or *économe-gérant* shall keep six specific plantation registers."⁵⁵ This directive raises a critical question: Was it a response to complaints from absentee landlords about mismanagement, or did it signal the growing professionalisation of the *gérant*'s role? While the motivations behind the regulation remain unclear, its detailed prescriptions suggest a broader shift in how plantation management was perceived. By the late eighteenth century, the *gérant*'s role was no longer an informal arrangement but a structured position with codified responsibilities. This formalisation not only reinforced the authority of absentee owners over distant estates but also exposed the tension between the owners' expectations and the realities of the *gérants*' day-to-day challenges.

Plantation management is, therefore, not just a matter of riding around the plantation on one's horse and enjoying the "sweetness" that comes with a position of authority, as Malenfant might have claimed. As the central organ of the coercive system, the *gérant* played a repressive role, as described by Michael Zeuske, aiming to control and prevent revolts.⁵⁶ His duties, however, went far beyond the mere exercise of violence. Ducoeurjoly devotes seven pages to the responsibilities of the *gérant*, and his list is, according to him, not exhaustive. A *gérant* would need mathematical knowledge for the construction and repair of buildings, medical knowledge to provide the necessary assistance in the absence of a doctor, and agricultural knowledge to grow food for the enslaved people and himself. Keeping the plantation in good condition by trimming the hedges and allowing access to water is also imperative. Managing livestock and husbandry add to these basic skills every *gérant* needs to master.⁵⁷ Given the complexity and importance of his tasks, Caitlin Rosenthal argues that the existence of the *gérant* shows the introduction of "scientific management" to the homesteads, which involved calculating productivity, knowing the work strengths of the enslaved, and improving farming techniques to obtain better yields, all in order to guarantee the plantation remained operational and profitable.⁵⁸ This complexity in management illustrates the evolution of the *gérant*'s function from a simple contract worker to an experienced and highly qualified employee.

From this perspective, the *gérant* was thus the mainstay of the plantation's economic success, with no other single figure holding a more important position in the management of the plantation system.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the *gérants*, like "nine-tenths of the whites ... considered the colony only 'as an inn' where they were only passing through and where they did not expect to die."⁶⁰ Consequently, their only way out of their "*gérant*-ial" condition was to set up a hidden economy for their own benefit.

⁵⁴ Malenfant, *Des colonies*, 162.

⁵⁵ Ordinance of 3 December 1784, in Médéric Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Loix et constitutions des colonies françaises de l'Amérique sous le Vent.*, vol. 6 (Paris: Auteur, 1784), 656.

⁵⁶ Michael Zeuske, *Handbuch Geschichte der Sklaverei: Eine Globalgeschichte von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 202.

⁵⁷ "Des blancs chefs de travaux sur les habitations; devoir d'un *gérant*," in Ducoeurjoly, *Manuel des habitants*, 63–9.

⁵⁸ On scientific management theory, see Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery*.

⁵⁹ See William Scarborough, *The Overseer: Plantation Management in the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), xi.

⁶⁰ Prosper Boissonnade, *Saint-Domingue à la veille de la Révolution et la question de la représentation coloniale aux États-généraux (janvier 1788-7 juillet 1789)* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1906), 46.

Hidden in Plain Sight: The Illegal Activities of the *Gérants* on the Plantation

The *gérants* as *petits blancs* had a reputation for being masters of violence⁶¹ and for poor administration of plantations, primarily due to their involvement in smuggling and illegal activities, which contributed to this negative image. Despite this, Saint-Domingue was one of the wealthiest and most productive colonies in the world. Through the correspondence of the Fleuriau and Brossard de la Poupardière families, the actions of two plantation *gérants*, Jean-Baptiste Arnaudeau and Binet, come to light, revealing how they navigated the hidden economy of Saint-Domingue. Their experiences illustrate the complex interplay of authority, distance, and ambition, showcasing the ways *gérants* leveraged their roles to engage in informal economic networks that significantly shaped the colony's prosperity.

The *gérants* Binet (whose first name is unknown) and Jean-Baptiste Arnaudeau, who managed the plantations of the Brossard de la Poupardière and Fleuriau families, respectively, serve as examples of the role and conditions of *gérants* in Saint-Domingue. While their relationships with their employers differed, they were united in their involvement in illicit activities on their respective plantations. The limited information available about these *gérants* can be gleaned from the correspondence they maintained with the owner, which provides insight into their education, character, and handwriting. The only information available about Binet comes from letters written by Jean-Jacques Brossard de la Poupardière. In an 1824 exchange with his mother, Brossard mentions an orphan living on his property whom he considers to be his godson and plans to pay a yearly salary of 1,000 to 1,500 pounds.⁶² Brossard's brief description of the orphan suggests that he took him in while he was still a minor and trained him as a bursar in the hopes of leaving him in charge of his plantation. It is possible to speculate that Binet was an illegitimate child of a white father and a Black mother who was either enslaved or free, or of two free people of colour. In either case, it seems likely that Binet himself was Black or of mixed race.⁶³ Brossard does not mention the skin colour of his *gérant*, but he does state that he "tamed" him and he was now "very faithful," phrases that seem to make reference to common perceptions of Black people by whites as "savage."⁶⁴

After Jean-Jacques Brossard's departure, the situation changed significantly, according to, Sauzeau, a relative of the family, Brossard de la Poupardière himself, and other witnesses. Binet was described as a problematic character and was eventually fired by Brossard due to poor management of the plantation. Binet's fate after his dismissal remains unclear. Is he the Gabriel Binet who owned a house in the parish of Aquin a few years later? Or the Pierre Binet, who worked as a coastal pilot between 1757 and 1785? As is often the case with plantation *gérants*, little information is available about their identities beyond their names.

The case of Jean-Baptiste Arnaudeau is unique in that his correspondence with his employer, Aimé-Benjamin Fleuriau, is well preserved. Arnaudeau lived at the Bellevue plantation from 1775, according to one letter he wrote to Fleuriau. He also left behind some personal archives. His daughter's birth certificate of 5 September 1793 and his marriage certificate to Marguerite François-Baussan of 23 July 1793 provide more information about his background. According to these records, Jean-Baptiste Arnaudeau was the legitimate son of Jean-Baptiste Arnaudeau and Françoise Chamois, born in La Rochelle in the parish of Saint-Barthélémy on 30 June 1753. His name was registered as Jean-Henri-Joseph-Élie

⁶¹ See Stubbs, *Masters of Violence*.

⁶² Letter of J.-J. Brossard de la Poupardière to his mother, 1724, AN, 661AP/10/R/136.

⁶³ On the illegitimacy of births see Vincent Cousseau, "La famille invisible. Illégitimité des naissances et construction des liens familiaux en Martinique (XVII^e siècle-début du XIX^e siècle)," *Annales de démographie historique* 122:2 (2011).

⁶⁴ Letter of J.-J. Brossard de la Poupardière to his mother, 1724, AN, 661AP/10/R/136.

Arnaudeau, but it was common in France during the Ancien Régime to use one's father's first name as a customary name. There is no doubt that this is the same Jean-Baptiste Arnaudeau who is found in Saint-Domingue twenty-two years later, as no other Arnaudeau was born in the same parish that year. It is likely that Arnaudeau's position on the plantation was obtained due to the close business and family connections between the Chamois and Fleuriau families. Arnaudeau's maternal grandfather had married into the Fleuriau family, and both families were linked through family and commercial relationships. The bond connecting Jean-Baptiste Arnaudeau and Aimé-Benjamin Fleuriau was therefore established differently from that between Binet and Jean-Jacques Brossard de la Poupardière, as Binet was a stranger to that family. Nevertheless, both relationships were based essentially on trust, which was easily broken in the absence of the plantation's owner, as distance created a shift in the power dynamic between owners and *gérants*, with the latter often taking advantage of their position to engage in illegal activities.

The "hijacking" of enslaved people was a widespread issue in the colony of Saint-Domingue, reflecting both the *gérants*' significant autonomy and the systemic flaws in plantation management. *Gérants* would often use enslaved people for their personal gain or profit, such as for additional labour on the *gérant*'s own property, rather than for the purposes intended by the plantation owner. A relative of the Brossard de la Poupardière family documented this practice, stating that Binet used the slaves of the plantation for his own profit.⁶⁵ Arnaudeau was known to engage in this practice, according to Colonel Malenfant, who reported the accounts of his neighbour's slaves, who claimed that "he [Arnaudeau] has a property in the Mornes; it is Fleuriau's Negroes who plant the coffee, who do all the work. He has 15 to 20 Negroes of his own. Every week he sends 30 to 40 Negroes from Fleuriau to his plantation. Isn't this white man a rascal?" Such practices underline how *gérants* blurred the lines between personal enrichment and their formal responsibilities, undermining plantation owners' control.⁶⁶

In response to the misuse of enslaved labour, legal measures such as the 23 December 1785 ordinance sought to penalise *gérants* for misappropriation, recognising it as a form of theft punishable by fines: "Those of the said *procureurs* or *économés-gérants* who are found to have hijacked for their own profit or to the profit of a third party the work of the slaves entrusted to their care, without the written consent of the owner ... will be prosecuted, as thieves."⁶⁷ This legislation was driven by the desire of owners to maintain control over the activities of their *gérants*, but distance, as well as the lack of effective means, often made it difficult for owners to monitor and regulate these actions. As stated in the ordinance, the "Police courante d'habitation" (plantation police) was tasked with addressing such offences. Yet, in practice, they tended to focus on enslaved individuals—tracking maroons or preventing theft—rather than monitoring *gérants*' behaviour.⁶⁸ Consequently, *gérants* were able to continue to commit crimes with relative impunity. For absentee owners like the Fleuriaus and Brossards, financial returns often took precedence over concerns about labour mismanagement, underscoring the prioritisation of profits over control.

In addition to the hijacking of enslaved people, *gérants* were also implicated in embezzling plantation resources, a fact often revealed through evidenced discrepancies in bookkeeping. The Ordinance of 1784 mandated managers to regularly send accounts and

⁶⁵ Letter of Sauzeau to J.-J. Brossard de la Poupardière, 1736, AN, 661AP/7/R/29.

⁶⁶ Further research is needed to determine whether absenteeism led to greater violence on plantations, but pro-slavery writers often blamed absentee owners and their managers for issues such as worker mistreatment and revolts, deflecting attention from the systemic brutality of the plantation system. See Burnard and Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine*, 254.

⁶⁷ Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Loix et constitution*, 927.

⁶⁸ Bernard Gainot, "Considérations sur la police aux colonies," in *Ordonner et partager la ville: XVII^e-XIX^e siècle*, ed. Gaël Rideau and Pierre Serna (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2019), 195–210.

journals detailing the progress, expenses, and income of the plantation. While intended to provide absentee owners with oversight, these records frequently reported lower-than-expected revenues. Correspondence between owners and *gérants* often centred on crop yields and shipments, particularly of sugar and coffee. At the beginning of each letter he sent to his employer, Arnaudeau would report on the shipment of barrels to France, but the yield from the plantation appeared to be insufficient for the Fleuriau family. Following the death of his father in 1787, Louis-Benjamin Fleuriau took over correspondence with Arnaudeau. He identified two primary causes for the low yield: the need for enhanced agricultural methods and a lack of effective prioritisation. Despite the geographical separation and age disparity, Louis-Benjamin's familial ties and acknowledgement of Arnaudeau's expertise prevented him from being overly assertive with the *gérant*. Instead, he adopted a polite and counselling tone. However, Arnaudeau used this dynamic to his advantage. In his monthly updates, he blamed poor output on uncontrollable external factors, including inadequate slave labour, harsh weather events like droughts, and tropical storms. He expressed himself thusly:

Since my last letter of the 4th of this month, in which I informed you of the severe drought we have been experiencing, there has been much change. Since that time, we have had the misfortune to experience on the 16th of this month a most terrible hurricane, which lasted about 6 hours and caused the greatest possible damage to your plantation. The storm levelled your medical facility and annihilated 12 slave dwellings, as well as most of your surgery structures. Part of the mill and the sugar refinery were also destroyed, with the refinery almost entirely uncovered and the slave cabins being plundered. The workshop buildings were also destroyed, and the banana plantation was levelled entirely, with all the cane plants being flattened. These events are likely to diminish my expectations for the upcoming harvest.⁶⁹

These consistent justifications highlight the *gérants'* ability to deflect blame while exploiting the trust and distance inherent in absentee ownership. Determining whether Arnaudeau's explanations masked fraudulent intentions remains challenging. When the plantation's poor performance could not be attributed to external factors like weather or insufficient enslaved labour, Arnaudeau claimed ignorance, as illustrated by his statement: "I see with sorrow that they [the sugars] have reached you badly conditioned. I don't know what the reason could be."⁷⁰ Are indeed the sugars poorly conditioned, or has the *gérant* deliberately sent lower quality sugar in order to retain the higher quality sugar for personal gain? It is very likely that Arnaudeau resold some of the family's sugar to the black market. Was the plantation he purchased in 1789 bought with the money he made as a smuggler? One can only speculate. Despite the family's frequent requests for financial accounts and their desire for "significant improvement,"⁷¹ Arnaudeau was able to maintain a balance that satisfied the family, even as sugar production declined. At the time of Aimé-Benjamin Fleuriau's death in 1787, the Bellevue plantation had produced 242 barrels of sugar, which had increased to 352 by 1790,⁷² generating an annual income of 306,895 francs for the Fleuriau family from sugar production alone.⁷³ The value of the Bellevue plantation was estimated at 167,612.25 francs, making it one of the top 100 properties in

⁶⁹ Letter of Louis-Benjamin Fleuriau to Jean-Baptiste Arnaudeau, 1787, ADG, 61 J 40, fol. 267.

⁷⁰ Letter of Louis-Benjamin Fleuriau to Jean-Baptiste Arnaudeau, 1787, ADG, 61 J 40, fol. 297.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² "État des produits de l'habitation Fleuriau pendant 14 ans," 1791, ADG, 61 J 39, fol. 8.

⁷³ "Récapitulation des barriques de sucre Brut provenant de l'habitation Fleuriau pour l'année 1790," 1791 ADG, 61 J 39, fol. 64. In addition to the Bellevue plantation, the family owned rental properties in the town of Cap-Français.

Saint-Domingue.⁷⁴ This ability to balance the family's expectations while likely engaging in illicit activities underscores the complexities of the *gérant*-owner relationship, particularly under conditions of absenteeism.

In contrast to the relationship between Jean-Baptiste Arnaudeau and the Fleuriau family, the dynamic between Jean-Jacques Brossard de la Poupardière and Binet was fraught with tension, characterised by poor communication and growing mistrust. After leaving the plantation, Brossard observed a notable shift in Binet's behaviour. Once attentive to his employer's interests, Binet increasingly prioritised his own, neglecting his responsibilities as manager. Brossard lamented this change in a letter, writing, "You only have ambitions for your own interests. In the first and second years of my departure, you seemed to be very zealous for my interests, but now you are only recognised as being concerned with yours and ready to sacrifice mine."⁷⁵ Desperate for information about the state of his property and Binet's activities, he reached out to neighbouring friends and to his *économe*, M. Sollicoffre. Brossard angrily wrote to Binet, "I had to write to my friends since I could not get anything from you or from Mr Solicofre [*sic*] who was as secretive as you."⁷⁶

Brossard de la Poupardière repeatedly voiced his frustration with Binet's lack of transparency, criticising his self-serving behaviour and neglect of the plantation's interests. He accused Binet of withholding essential information and failing to provide requested accounts, which was a recurring issue in their correspondence. Binet also faced allegations of taking unwarranted liberties, including undertaking unauthorised construction projects without consulting Brossard.⁷⁷ This ongoing conflict culminated in Brossard's sharp rebuke: "Think about it if all the goods you possess are legitimately yours. You must have made great profits to have made a fortune similar to yours in such a short time."⁷⁸ This statement reveals Brossard's acute awareness of Binet's fraudulent behaviour and strongly implies that Binet had amassed his wealth through illicit means. Brossard's frustration underscores his belief that Binet was exploiting his position for personal financial gain to the detriment of the plantation and its owner.

This recurring tension between absentee owners and their *gérants* reveals the paradoxical position of these intermediaries, who were simultaneously autonomous in their daily operations and somehow reliant on the trust of their employers. As *Supervisors and Authority* explains, "Managers operated in a space of delegated authority, where the absence of direct oversight both empowered and constrained their actions."⁷⁹ This dual dynamic highlights how *gérants* were able to exploit the latitude afforded by their roles, navigating the fine line between fulfilling their employers' expectations and advancing their own interests.

Rather than the illegal activities themselves, it was the fraud and embezzlement—exacerbated when the plantation's income could no longer meet expectations—that became the primary source of conflict between plantation owners and *gérants*. Smuggling, however, was often tolerated by owners as the inevitable cost of their absence. For *gérants*, these activities offered more than just financial rewards; they provided an opportunity

⁷⁴ Despite the self-proclamation of independence in 1804, France did not recognise the new Haitian state as such. After more than ten years of negotiations, France accepted the country's independence at the price of paying 150 million francs in compensation to the former plantation owners, which became known as the "Haitian debt." During the compensation process, the value of the properties was assessed to compensate the French families for the loss of their property. These figures can be found at <https://esclavage-indemnites.fr/public/>. For more information on Haiti's compensation, see Marcel Dorigny et al., *Haïti-France, les chaînes de la dette: le rapport Mackau* (1825) (Paris: Hémisphères éditions, 2021).

⁷⁵ "Copies des lettres missives de J.-J. Brossard de La Poupardière débutant en 1739," 1739, AN, 661AP/8/R/34.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Supervisors and Authority*, 112.

to transcend their marginalised status as *petits blancs* and assert their autonomy within the rigid plantation hierarchy. Through theft and smuggling, *gérants* carved out a sphere of influence that allowed them to accumulate wealth and redefine their position within colonial society. The hidden economy they created operated not because it was invisible to plantation owners or the enslaved workforce but because it functioned beyond the boundaries of legal and institutional oversight. This extra-legal economy was not merely a byproduct of absenteeism but a defining feature of the plantation system, revealing the profound vulnerabilities and contradictions at its core.

Conclusion

The *gérants* of Saint-Domingue occupied a unique yet contradictory position within the plantation economy. They were indispensable to its operation but often distrusted by both owners and colonial administrators. Tasked with overseeing enslaved labour and maximising profits, they exploited the autonomy granted by absenteeism to navigate both legal and illicit activities, creating hidden economies that became essential to the colony's wealth.

Unlike in many other Caribbean plantation economies, the *gérants* of Saint-Domingue operated in one of the wealthiest and most productive colonial environments of the eighteenth century, which heightened both the stakes and the opportunities for misconduct. The scale of Saint-Domingue's sugar and coffee exports, alongside its complex social hierarchies, set it apart, enabling *gérants* to play a more influential role than their counterparts elsewhere in the Caribbean. This distinctive context magnified their capacity for fraud and smuggling, revealing systemic vulnerabilities that were less visible in colonies with smaller economies or tighter oversight.

Through the cases of Binet and Arnaudeau, this article has shown how *gérants* used their roles not only to fulfil their employers' demands but also to pursue personal ambitions, revealing systemic vulnerabilities in the plantation system. Fraud, embezzlement, and smuggling were not anomalies but integral to the functioning of a colonial economy reliant on distance and delegation.

These findings highlight the *gérants*' pivotal role as intermediaries who bridged the divide between absentee planters and local realities. Their activities expose the plantation system's fragility while also demonstrating its adaptability in the face of such challenges. By exploring the hidden economies they fostered, this study sheds light on a lesser-known facet of plantation management, offering new perspectives on the economic and social dynamics of colonial slavery.

Mathilde Ackermann-Koenigs is a doctoral researcher in history at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris and at Bielefeld University in Germany. Her research explores the colonial and post-colonial history of Haiti, with a focus on plantation management, and a particular interest in the legal and bureaucratic mechanisms of post-slavery compensation and colonial continuity.

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