



**HAL**  
open science

**(Re)Reading Contacts of civilizations in Martinique and Guadeloupe, by Michel Leiris. Text excerpts presented by Jean-Luc Bonniol and Ary Gord**

Jean-Luc Bonniol, Ary Gordien

► **To cite this version:**

Jean-Luc Bonniol, Ary Gordien. (Re)Reading Contacts of civilizations in Martinique and Guadeloupe, by Michel Leiris. Text excerpts presented by Jean-Luc Bonniol and Ary Gord. *Appartenances & Altérités*, 2021, 1, n.p. 10.4000/alterites.388 . hal-04012081

**HAL Id: hal-04012081**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04012081>**

Submitted on 2 Mar 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

(Re)Reading *Contacts of civilizations in Martinique and Guadeloupe*, by Michel Leiris. Text excerpts presented by Jean-Luc Bonniol and Ary Gordien

Jean-Luc Bonniol and Ary Gordien

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/alterites/388>

DOI: 10.4000/alterites.388

ISSN: 1953-7476

**This article is a translation of:**

(Re)Lire *Contacts de civilisations en Martinique et en Guadeloupe*, de Michel Leiris. Extraits de texte présentés par Jean-Luc Bonniol et Ary Gordien<sup>1</sup> - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/alterites/386> [fr]

**Publisher**

Urmis

Brought to you by École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS)



**Electronic reference**

Jean-Luc Bonniol and Ary Gordien, "(Re)Reading *Contacts of civilizations in Martinique and Guadeloupe*, by Michel Leiris. Text excerpts presented by Jean-Luc Bonniol and Ary Gordien", *Appartenances & Altérités* [Online], 1 | 2021, Online since 29 June 2021, connection on 02 March 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/alterites/388> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/alterites.388>

---

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2023.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

---

# (Re)Reading *Contacts of civilizations in Martinique and Guadeloupe*, by Michel Leiris. Text excerpts presented by Jean-Luc Bonniol and Ary Gordien<sup>1</sup>

Jean-Luc Bonniol and Ary Gordien

---

- 1 On this first issue of *Appartenances & Altérités*, we have decided to present excerpts from Michel Leiris' book, *Contacts de civilisations en Martinique et en Guadeloupe*, published in 1955 under the aegis of UNESCO. This text seems remarkable to us for the finesse and acuity of its analysis of societies that are historically structured by racial criteria, and for its theoretical intuitions, which were far ahead of their time, at least for French research, in the field of race relations.
- 2 This text is part of a UNESCO long-term action, engaged at the end of the Second World War, after the Nazi horrors, reflecting on the issue of race. This is evidenced by the declarations on race that followed one another from 1950 to 1967, which are evoked in the interview with Jean Benoist, who participated in the 1964 Moscow conference and in the declaration that resulted therefrom. The issue also includes a series of publications commissioned from top researchers, such as C. Lévi-Strauss, who wrote his famous *Race and History* (1952) for the occasion, but also Michel Leiris himself, with a text entitled *Race and Civilization*, published a year earlier, in 1951. At the very end of the 1940s, Leiris already had a recognized literary body of work and a substantial ethnographic background, from his collaboration with Marcel Griaule and the publication of his essay, both literary and scientific, *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934). It was in this capacity that he was approached by UNESCO, seeking after collaborators for its program on the issue of race, at the instigation of Alfred Métraux, then director of the program, and wrote a preliminary note on "the social causes of race prejudice" ("les causes sociales du préjugé de race").<sup>2</sup>
- 3 In the early 1950s, the French West Indies, "old colonies" because they were the remnants of the first French colonial empire established in the 17th century, as well as

French Guiana and Reunion Island, had just emerged from their colonial status and had been granted departmental status by the assimilation law passed by Communist deputies Aimé Césaire and Léopold Bissol in 1946. They have of course inherited from their past a socio-racial structure marked by the social and economic preponderance of native whites, in a position of superiority over the mass of the "colored population", but without deadly racial tensions... Moreover, no legal segregation has been added to this picture: the inhabitants of the West Indies now participate in national political life through their elected representatives. This situation is in clear contrast to other multiracial societies, starting with the United States, where segregation and discriminatory laws against the "black" population still reigned, a source of recurrent conflicts, with their usual batch of homicides (often going unpunished). This is why UNESCO intends to document these cases of "harmonious" racial coexistence through studies that would make it possible to make "a positive contribution to the solution of the racial problem". Since Brazil seemed to present another case of "happy" racial situations, two studies were carried out, one by an American anthropologist, Charles Wagley, *Races and Classes in Rural Brazil* (1952); with the other by a Brazilian researcher, Thales de Azevedo, *The Colored Elites in a Brazilian City* (1953). And it is in this context that Michel Leiris received the commission for a contribution on the French West Indies, which will result in *Civilization Contacts in Martinique and Guadeloupe, Contacts de civilisations en Martinique et en Guadeloupe* (1955), a work published under the joint auspices of UNESCO and the publisher Gallimard.

- 4 Michel Leiris had already visited the West Indies in 1948, from July 28 to November 12. At the request of Aimé Césaire and the historian Charles-André Julien (1891-1991), Michel Leiris carried out an ethnographic mission in Martinique and Guadeloupe thanks to a grant awarded on the occasion of the centenary of the Revolution of 1848 and the abolition of slavery. He was also entrusted by Foreign Affairs with a mission of cultural relations in Haiti, where he stayed from September 24 to October 28 and where he met again with Métraux (in the collection *Cinq études d'ethnologie*, published in 1969, he recalls the strong ties that united him to Métraux and some anecdotes relating to their "wanderings" on the island, notably their visits to voodoo sanctuaries<sup>3</sup>). A "fairy-tale" journey, despite the observation which he made on the deplorable conditions in which the majority of people of color lived and the "constant oppression of the little ones by the great," which he made "as a sign of the admiration and friendship he [has] for Aimé Césaire." During his stay he gave three lectures, one of which was inspired by his trip: "Antilles and poetry of the crossroads." To carry out the investigation commissioned by UNESCO, again through Alfred Métraux, Leiris carried out a new four-month mission there, from March 21 to July 21, 1952.
- 5 A convinced anti-racist, Michel Leiris pointed out in his first note on the subject, which was widely used in his booklet, the different circumstances through which racial prejudice is formed: colonial situation with appropriation of land and exploitation of wealth; economic competition between groups of different origin; weapon of protection against poor immigrants; instrument of a nation to forge its unity around the idea of a "race of lords" with a view to a policy of conquest; it is also the designation by a state of a scapegoat in order to channel popular discontent and, finally, it is worth noting that it is the "normal" reaction of a group of humiliated and offended people who feel the need to strengthen their self-awareness in order to react against oppression. For him, it is indeed a prejudice, insofar as it rests on a "value judgment that is objectively unfounded and of cultural origin [...]. Linked essentially to antagonisms based on the

economic structure of modern societies, it is, insofar as the peoples will transform this structure, that we will see it disappear."

- 6 At the same period (presentation made on March 7, 1950 in front of the association of the scientific workers) he had pointed out the paradox of the ethnologist in a colonial situation, eager to contribute to the emancipation of the dominated societies which he studied but irremediably brought back to its belonging to the dominant society... Leiris seemed to have been uneasy by the ambiguity of the mission that was entrusted to him, as he had opened up about it to his friend Métraux: throughout his investigation, he realized that the ideal image postulated at the outset does not correspond to reality... But, out of scientific honesty, he explored all the strata, social and racial, of West Indian society, striving to draw up the most objective report possible of the situation...
- 7 In his introduction, Michel Leiris recalled the objectives of his first mission to Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Haiti (i.e., the three Antilles that have both French as an official language and French Creole as a popular language): "to research what can be noted there as traits of civilization of African origin." He specified that his second study in the French West Indies will be "purely sociological" and will not take "the form of an administrative investigation" and that it "will be carried out in all objectivity, disregarding considerations of a political nature," with the aim of "bringing the Martinicans and Guadeloupeans of color, [...] French citizens to a *concrete* equality (not only from a legal standpoint) with the other citizens [...] without them having to renounce on all which belongs to them in their own right in terms of regional particularities". He then breaks down this reflection according to three main lines:
1. To reflect on the diffusion of the French culture, in the "colored masses", particular on the general problem of popular education;
  2. To reflect on the specific contribution that can be expected from these same masses, whose origin are linked -"even if only remotely and in a very fragmentary way"- to civilizations "other than European";
  3. To contribute to the elimination of racial prejudice.
- 8 He added that the research was done by collecting administrative and non-administrative documents; by interviewing numerous and varied personalities; and by informal personal observations.
- 9 The structure of the book is tripartite. The first being a presentation of the French West Indies, including a "history of settlement", where the main lines of the history of the islands are recalled in a very clear manner, around the theme of population influxes, essentially linked to colonization and the slave trade, feeding a retrospective on the slave system and the racial relations it generated. The second being devoted to an analysis of French culture in Martinique and Guadeloupe: it focuses on the teaching institution, ultimately addressing the problem of a specifically West Indian culture, with emphasis being principally set on the role played by local intellectuals. The third part, cautiously titled "relations between categories based on origin", thereby avoiding the term "race", is the framework for the extracts presented here.
- 10 In his part entitled "History of settlement", Michel Leiris laid the historical foundations of the racial situation in the West Indies, by giving a very informed retrospective of the history of the two islands, from the Carib Indians, who soon disappeared after the French took possession in 1635, but in relation to whom certain subjects can allege "fantasized genealogies". From this date onwards, a settlement of "whites" from

Europe (often arriving as "hired personnel") and "blacks" transported from Africa to constitute the slave labor force conceived as necessary for the plantation crops (first and foremost sugar cane), a labor force whose numbers surpassed the white population by the end of the 17th century. He recalled the royal decree known as the "Black Code" (*Code Noir*), which governed the control of the masters over the slaves while guaranteeing the latter a semblance of legal security... Michel Leiris then insisted on the major fact of the existence of constant sexual relations between the two groups (white men, black women), which fueled a process of miscegenation and contributed to the emergence of the intermediate category of mulattoes... He could therefore paint a general picture of West Indian society on the eve of the Revolution: a staggering of classes to which responds, without absolutely overlapping, a staggering of races (whites, mulattoes in the broad sense, negroes). In this doubly stratified society, according to class and race, the whites, "anxious to maintain themselves as the dominant class" (even if a remnant of poor whites remained until the 20th century), feared the rise of the mulattoes and "this fear was aggravated by the ambiguous situation that the mulattoes owed to their 'mixed-blood' character: they are linked on the one hand with the servile class (where they have relatives) and, on the other, often notoriously related to whites."

- 11 Returning to the late application of the ideas of the Revolution to the colonies, he recalled the granting of political rights to all free men of color (National Convention: May 28, 1792); decree abolishing slavery (February 5, 1794), which was hardly applied only in Saint Domingue and Guadeloupe, the other French islands being occupied by the English. The revolt of the officer of color, Louis Delgrès following the landing in Guadeloupe of General Richepanse, sent by Bonaparte to restore the old order; having become surrounded, he blew himself up with three hundred men (May 28, 1802), and remained since then one of the glories of the French Antilles. At the same time, Toussaint Louverture, leader of the revolt in Santo Domingo, was arrested and deported to France, which did not prevent the victory of the insurrection and the proclamation of Haiti's independence on January 1, 1804. For nearly half a century, slavery continued to prevail in Martinique and Guadeloupe, until its abolition in 1848, which led to profound upheavals in the economy of both islands:

[...] from the economic perspective, the substitution of wage labor for slave labor, which was obviously less costly, was [...] a cause of financial difficulties for a number of producers; a process of accentuation of industrial and agricultural concentration was also seen to have started before the abolition, a movement which accelerated, as well in Martinique as in Guadeloupe, from the moment when a capitalist system of exploitation replaced a somewhat feudal type of system but which, especially, appears related to the crises due to the competition of the industry of sugars extracted from the beet, of which Europe had witnessed the great rise as of the first half of the century.

- 12 The differences between Guadeloupe, where limited companies were established, and Martinique, still marked by the predominance of family companies held by white Creoles, are pointed out in this regard... Abolition also led to labor crises that brought the introduction, in Martinique and Guadeloupe, of new groups of workers, according to a system of commitments, most of whom settled down: Africans known as *Congos*, Indians known as *coolies* (who did not entirely blend in with the rest of the colored population and who retained certain cultural peculiarities, practicing, in particular, rites of their own); Chinese and Annamese, Lebanese and Syrians... The latest arrivals were the metropolitans, who were numerous because of the departmentalization

acquired in 1946, but most of them did not settle down, something which did not prevent them from being the source of a socio-racial tension constituting one of the main problems of coexistence of the groups in the two islands; accentuated by the emergence of a local intelligentsia, due to the wide diffusion of education.

- 13 In the excerpts presented here, we have introduced, in order to underline the argument, sub-headings that are obviously not in the original text, as well as some explanatory notes (indicated by the abbreviations JLB and AG).

## Race and class

- 14 Michel Leiris started with an observation: Martinique and Guadeloupe are characterized by a complex socio-racial structure. Faithful to a Marxist theoretical orientation, he endeavored, throughout the picture he drew of the situation, to point out the problematic correspondences between "races" and classes.

Present-day Creole society can be divided into three major sections. Whites of the upper middle class, mulattoes of the middle class, Negroes of the working classes. Such is the general view, in conformity with a traditional pattern, that Martinicans and Guadeloupeans have of a social stratification that is in fact more complicated, since the division on a racial basis (itself rather blurred, given the multiplicity of intermediate types) only roughly overlaps the division on an economic basis and that, without even mentioning the poor whites or the few blacks that the rich bourgeoisie (in Martinique at least) can count among its ranks, one finds whites and blacks alongside mulattoes in the middle class, a certain number of mulattoes belonging to the spheres of the upper bourgeoisie (those who in Martinique are called "great mulattoes") and a mass of people who would logically be classified as half-breed ("metis"), given their mixed ancestry, being included with the negroes in the popular strata. "Any rich Negro is a mulatto, any poor mulatto is a Negro," said the Haitian, Jean-Jacques Acaau, leader of the peasant insurrection in the South, in 1843, in an aphorism that has become a saying, which seems to show that the relativity of this tripartite division is not at all ignored by the West Indians.

A few white notables (large landowners, company directors and shareholders, exporters, etc.) thus have economic control in both islands, with the difference being that in Martinique these whites are natives, whereas in Guadeloupe many of them are only representatives of metropolitan companies and others are white Martinicans who occupy a sufficiently important place in the sugar industry for many Guadeloupeans to say that Martinique is in the process of "colonizing" its neighbor. Between this dominant class of very small numbers (in which rare elements of color manage to take their place) and the mass of salaried workers and small landowners or settlers, a mass whose core is made up of the more or less mixed descendants of the former enslaved Negroes, there is a middle class made up mostly of people of color, many of whom are the descendants of the former "free men of color", and in which, along with a few rural or semi-rural people (medium-sized landowners and "managers" of dwellings, the latter often being whites to whom colored "economists" are subordinate), there are civil servants, most merchants, and all the members of the liberal professions (notaries, lawyers, doctors, etc.).

The entirety of the working mass represented by the agricultural or industrial workers and the small producers was made up of blacks or people of color, except for most of the inhabitants of the Saintes and Saint-Barthélemy or very restricted groups such as the "Matignons" of Grande-Terre.

In Martinique, the mulattoes were also responsible for a large part of the distillery, the major West Indian industry after sugar, and they were also among the main importers (in this island, a black man was cited as having become a tycoon in the

rum trade on a strictly local level). However, in Martinique as well as in Guadeloupe, it is the white Creoles who not only have the upper hand in the export trade, but also occupy a prominent place in the import trade (foodstuffs, building materials, large hardware, industrial equipment, fertilizers, manufactured products, etc.), so that they rank first in the category of these large merchants who are called in Fort-de-France the "*négociants du bord de mer*", a group which in Martinique is socially situated immediately after the large industrialists and landowners.

In Martinique, the inhabitants commonly called the "*békés*" or, for some of them, the "*Blancs de la route de Didier*" (after the name of the upper district, which is the elegant part of Fort-de-France) –that is to say, the native whites, numbering a few thousand and whose small core of families hold the economic control of the island– form a closed circle where there is close solidarity, whatever the personal rivalries may incidentally be. An endogamy almost as absolute as in the days of slavery being the rule among them, all being more or less allied or related, so that a white Creole in trouble will always find among the other white Creoles a relative or a relation who will perhaps not provide him with the means of surviving better than in "*béké goyave*" or "*béké malou*" (a poor white from the countryside), but, at least, will provide him with a job that will prevent him from falling into a misery detrimental to the prestige of the caste. This is what the saying goes: "*Tout' béké cé béké. Béké quimbé la queue béké*" (All "*békés*" are "*békés*", a "*béké*" [always] has the back of another "*béké*").

In Guadeloupe, where the sugar industry had passed for the most part into the hands of metropolitan companies and for a significant part also into those of Creoles belonging to two of the great white Martinican families, those referred to as "*Blancs pays*" did not have the quasi-feudal supremacy that the "*békés*" had in Martinique and, although they too were jealous of the integrity of their race, they constituted a more divided milieu. With the exception of a few who occupy prominent positions in the cane industry (either in administrative positions or as owners...), the most powerful being the banana growers based in Guadeloupe itself, so to say, or importers/exporters residing mostly in Pointe-à-Pitre, the main commercial center. Most of the large banana plantation owners live in the region of Saint-Claude, a highland resort located a few kilometers from Basse-Terre and built with villas, many of which belong to these whites as well as to wealthy whites from other regions, so that one hears in Guadeloupe about the wealthy society represented by the "Whites of Saint-Claude" somewhat as it is in Martinique for those of the Didier Road (Route Didier).<sup>4</sup>

In Terre-de-Haut and Terre-de-Bas –the only inhabited islets of the Saintes archipelago– most of the inhabitants are farmers or fishermen, some of whom (in Terre-de-Haut) are pure white or very slightly mixed. La Désirade only has a few whites among its 1,700 inhabitants, fishermen or farmers [...].

Traditionally, the whites represent the dominant class, the mulattoes the middle class and the blacks the lower class. However, there are whites who are economically situated in the middle class, even in the lower class (poor whites of Grande-Terre, Saint-Barthélemy, the Saintes, etc.); on the other hand, many mulattoes are rich, as well as some blacks. The division into racial categories, as it is locally accepted, is already a problem, since it applies to a mass of individuals of whom only a certain number can be considered pure whites or blacks, the rest presenting an extreme variety of intermediate types. Does the division into racial categories, as it is locally accepted, take the physical type as an exclusive criterion, or does it bring into play other arbitrary elements of appreciation, since a certain economic promotion (or conversely, a regression) may entail, for example, for an individual, an equivalent promotion (or a regression) in terms of the categories?

However, we note that in addition to these two modes of social discrimination (economic and, moreover, cultural), which can be considered common to the West Indian departments and those of metropolitan France, there is another, in



Martinique and Guadeloupe, linked to the special conditions under which the two islands were populated: European immigration, importation of Africans and unions both within each of the two races and between one and the other are at the origin of the present population for its quasi-totality, so that the heterogeneity is at least more apparent than in our regions, whose populating took place from human groups which, as varied as they are, all belong to the white race. These differences in color or, more broadly, in type are not exclusively physical differences, since they are accompanied by a historical context to which they are the visible mark: all racial questions aside, a white person in the West Indies can be immediately recognized as a descendant of free men, a black person (almost certainly) as a descendant of slaves, and (with equal probability) one who belongs to one of the intermediate categories as the more or less distant product of the union of the servile class with that of the masters or free people. Moreover, it may be said that on the whole, whatever the changes that have occurred in the social structure, it is still the whites who represent the highest class economically and the blacks the lowest, while the mulattoes remain in the middle; from which it follows that for almost every individual, one can presume, on the basis of his or her physical appearance alone, without great risk of error, if not the rank he or she personally occupies in society, then at least the class to which he or she belongs. While in France a person of the most humble extraction, having reached a certain position, will pass unnoticed in his new environment if he has adopted its modes and manners, it is nothing like that in the West Indies: Everyone wears his pedigree on his face, and even the most elegant and distinguished man of color necessarily remains a "man of color", that is to say, someone whose social promotion is known to be recent, or in any case, who is attached at some more or less remote point of his ancestry to a lower class. The purely social tensions that we observe in our countries have here a particular component that complicates them: the *racial* component which can only aggravate these tensions, insofar as it introduces between the elements of the population differences that are not only immediately perceptible and calling for all the inferences to which render, between men, their bodily dissimilarities, though historically significant; insofar as it also counteracts the factor of relaxation that represents the mobility of classes in our societies since an individual, in the West Indies, always remains marked by the environment from which he comes, and that it is consequently more difficult for him than elsewhere to integrate completely to a class distinct from the one to which he is linked, in a more or less loose or more or less narrow way, by his close or distant origins. Divisions which do not absolutely cover the economically based divisions and only present a very vague relationship to cultural categories (given the increasing diffusion of education in all its forms and the influence exerted in a uniformizing sense by democratic institutions) are thus created between the natives of the West Indies, not taking into account that other element of the system: Whites from the metropolis who, either as civil servants or in any other capacity, reside for varying lengths of time in Martinique and Guadeloupe and, coming from another climate with habits, interests as well as ideals peculiar to each of them, participate temporarily in West Indian life.

At first glance, it may seem to the visitors of the French West Indies –however obvious the social inequalities may be– that there is perfect harmony between people differing only in physical appearance and that, if it is there, as in the whole of the modern world, class antagonisms, there are at least no "racial" problems, so to speak. The hovels of the lower classes of color are somewhat opposed to the rich homes of so many white Creoles, and one hardly meets blacks in the most elegant places, but, besides the fact that on our continents the workers also have their hovels, like the peasants have their shacks, and that one cannot count the places practically forbidden to those who have only a modest budget, one finds, on the other hand, in the West Indies poor whites at the same time as people of color who are heavily endowed, so that even admitting that in this case the inequality of

fortunes is particularly glaring, nothing still permits one to speak of an inequality with racial significance. In the streets everyone is on the same side, and it is not uncommon to see a white passer-by and a colored passer-by greeting each other kindly or talking for a few moments in a very cordial tone. The diversity of these physical types and the predominance (noticeable especially in Martinique) of intermediate types – "white" mulattoes, "brown" mulattoes, "capres" closer to blacks and "chabins" (less frequent) combining light skin and eyes with negroid features, or blond or red but frizzy hair with more or less dark skin– testify that at least in ancient times whites and people of color were abundantly mixed, and that racial prejudice, however strong it may have been and however much it may have restricted legitimate unions, has never led to absolute segregation, since it has not prevented numerous interbreeding.

A little attention, however, allows the visitor to perceive that with the hierarchy according to which the classes are ordered, essentially economically based, another hierarchy is superimposed which, without coinciding rigorously with the first, shows that the evolution which has taken place in Martinique and Guadeloupe since 1848, although considerable, is far from having erased the old social divisions of the slave era: the hierarchy whose categories still conform to the traditional distribution of the population according to origin, the highest category being that of the pure whites (or those who pass for such) and the lowest being that of the negroes (in which all the somewhat dark-skinned individuals belonging to the economically lower strata tend to be confused with the blacks) [...].

We can thus see that, roughly speaking, even in the cities (where occupations are multiple and social mixing is more extensive than in the countryside), it is the lighter people, and especially the Whites, who occupy the highest positions in the hierarchy. The traditional pattern: white upper class, mulatto middle class, Negro lower class, remains more or less in conformity with the perceptible reality, but however shocking such a distribution may seem, at first sight, this apart from what is strictly speaking class conflict and individual competitions, there is a sort of adjustment between the categories of color such that the question of race would not expressly intervene in the antagonisms. However, this relatively optimistic view does not stand up to scrutiny, and one soon finds that racial conflicts, if not preponderant, are at least inextricably intertwined with the other conflicts that arise at any moment in West Indian life as in that of most societies.

## The criterion of race, its foundations

- 15 The term "race" recurs in the text, despite the pre-eminence it gives to the position of class, and Michel Leiris was careful in revealing all the dimensions of this classification criterion...

## The phenotypic assessment of individuals

In addition to the fact that, as a general rule, a native white man, even a poor one, considers that a mixed marriage would be a mismatch for him, a clear illustration of this state of affairs is given by the fact that, in colored circles, it is usually considered enviable to have a light skin and non-frizzy hair, that is to say, a physical type that is as little Negro-African as possible: a child who, in a family, has more marked negroid features than the others, is commonly said to be "badly brought out" and a person with straight hair is said to have "good (Guadeloupe) hair", the expression "to improve" one's hair being, moreover, used in connection with someone who makes it straight by means of a product or a preparation; on the other hand, a person with a complexion dark enough for there to be no doubt about his or her color will be described as "brown" and, for another, one will speak, for

example, of his or her "Tunisian complexion", as if it were necessary to slide as much as possible on the Africanism of characters considered as such, if not as unattractive, at least as expressing what is least flattering in the pedigree. Another illustration of this way of seeing things is given by the fact that the word "white" seems generally free of pejorative value, whereas the word "black" and especially the word "nègre", evoking a past of servility, are never neutral and will be frequently used in colored circles, not as anodyne qualifiers, but in full knowledge of the discredit attached to the physical characteristics to which they refer: "They are very black, but they are all fine", so will some people say, for example, of a well-to-do family whose members have very dark skin; either as a joke or as a positive insult, it could happen that people call each other "nègre" or "nègresse", or else one will apply this qualifier to one's own person or to that of a fellow being, sometimes because one intends to express ironically that, for others, one is nothing more than a nègre, and sometimes because taking up such a label amounts to asserting that one can, without any shame, belong to this disparaged category.<sup>5</sup> Everything happens, in short, as if it were common knowledge in the West Indies that it is a deficiency to be black; even if, from an economic perspective, one's position is modest, even miserable, a person of color will gladly take advantage of what can differentiate him from the blacks; and there are sayings to mock, among the mulattoes, with the attitude of superiority that many of them display towards the darker ones, the propensity that these members of the intermediate category would often have to forget that their ancestry relates them to the Negroes: "*Mulât' ka oublîé qui nég'esse c'est maman-li*" (the mulatto forgets that the negress is his mother), so does one ironically assure within the black circles of Guadeloupe.

Whether or not he has some knowledge of anthropological data, the non-native observer who comes to Martinique or Guadeloupe soon finds that his insight is often lacking when it is necessary to know, relying only on the appearance of the person with whom he comes into contact, in what racial category he is classified locally: such an individual whom he looks upon as a white man is in fact classified as a mulatto, such a person whom he takes to be a mulatto is in fact a white Creole, such a person is labeled a mulatto when he thought he was black, etc. Even when he knows that the color of the skin and the structure of the face are not the only characteristics retained for this classification and that the quality of the hair (more or less smooth or frizzy) plays a leading role, his uncertainties will remain frequent. As he will see, moreover, that the members of a family will often present very notable differences between them while they are all classified in the same category, he will soon come to recognize that it is not the physical type which proves to be determining, in a classification which is important to always remember as being traditional and not scientific.

## The genealogical control

In Martinique and Guadeloupe, given the narrowness of the environment, genealogies are generally known (at least in a global way) and it is according to its genealogy, or what one thinks one knows about it, that an individual will be classified: a white person is considered to be the one whose ancestry is, in principle, exclusively white, a mulatto the one who has a double ancestry, and a black person the one whose ancestry is essentially black. These distinctions used to be more nuanced, and special terms were used to designate a large number of categories, based not only on the theoretical proportion of white blood and black blood attributable to the individual in question, but also, in equal proportions, on the category of father and mother; These distinctions have now fallen into disuse, although two categories of mulattoes are still distinguished (including "white mulattoes") and the term "capres" or "capresses" is still used for individuals situated between blacks and mulattoes, and the term "chabins" or "chabines" (which is in common use) does not designate a category but individuals who seem

to present, instead of an amalgam, a paradoxical combination of traits of the black and white races.<sup>6</sup> In this genealogical perspective, the importance of which has remained paramount, whites are descendants of Europeans, blacks are descendants of Africans, and mulattoes are descendants of Europeans and Africans; but such a mode of classification does not only have an ethnic significance; since the Europeans who settled in the West Indies (and even the contract workers who were the "hired personnel") always had the status of free men, while the Africans came to the islands as slaves and the first mulattoes, most of which were the result of illegitimate relationships between whites and their colored concubines, represent – even in the case of legitimately born children of married people, such unions did not attract blame when the colonists were barely settled– the results of the union of slaves or former slaves with individuals pertaining to the free class. In such a perspective, the racial qualification is incidentally thus a social qualification, since whites belong by definition to the class of masters or at least of free men, blacks to that of slaves, while mulattoes have a partially servile ancestry and, insofar as they appear historically as the fruits not only of miscegenation but also of illegitimacy (or of what was not long in coming to be regarded as a misalliance), are a mongrel race in the proper sense of the term.

Being racially and socially defined by a genealogy that is not a mystery to anyone, a large number of mulattoes and other people of color find themselves in a singular position vis-à-vis certain white Creoles, with whom they are united, despite the difference in races, by known ties of kinship, either because they present themselves as members of an illegitimate lineage constituting (according to the expression of M. Gilbert Gratiant) an "adventive family" in relation to the legitimate lineage, or as members of a legitimate lineage descended from a white person who had been misaligned and who were part of these groups of "parallel families", some of whose branches were white and others colored.

It is well known that many mulattoes are the natural children of a white Creole who were conceived with people of color, who, in most cases, belongs to a modest background. If it is a white person who had an important economic position and took care of his education, the person concerned may enjoy a relative consideration in the white Creole milieu, it being understood that he should never take advantage of this relationship. In principle (but especially in the older generation with its patriarchal habits), a self-respecting White Creole will do something for his natural children: he will normally employ them in his business or establish them in some other way and, in the best cases, provide them with an education and even, eventually, legal recognition. There is often a declared rivalry between legitimate and illegitimate children: a white Creole will arouse the displeasure of his family if he tries to introduce his natural children into his legitimate family, or even if he gives the impression that he prefers them to his legal children, or perhaps a lawsuit, which the family will bring if the father has attested in favor of his children born out of wedlock; However, a white Creole who needs the services of a man of color (as a lawyer or doctor, for example) will sometimes prefer to go to someone from his adventitious kinship, knowing that as a parent –although such bond, which remains implicit, is not invoked– he is likely to find someone who will use it with him to the best of their ability. Generally speaking, having the half-breed born of a non-legalized mixed union benefitting from the very wide tolerance practiced in the French West Indies, at least in working-class circles, with regard to illegitimate births, and his association with the category of color that occupies the top of the hierarchy cannot, moreover, be considered as a defect [...].

Between members of parallel families, it is not necessarily excluded that there are sociable relations, the relationship being openly recognized as such; however, if it happens that the white relative invites the colored relative, the latter will generally be circumspect and will accept, for example, only invitations in small groups, preferring to abstain if it is a question of a "big invitation" because he knows that in this case his white relatives might be embarrassed by his presence in front of their

white Creole hosts. Since many white Creole families are represented both in the islands and in the metropolis, it may also happen that a person of color who is related to one of them is openly received in the metropolitan part of the family while the island branches pretend to ignore them.

If genealogy (real or supposed) appears to be the great criterion for the distribution of West Indian society into various hierarchical categories that almost constitute castes given their endogamic tendency, it is extremely far from determining a hierarchy of the same order within these categories. Without doubt there are white families more established than others and some of noble stock, mulatto families whose members claim an ancestry at least as flattering as that of so many of these white Creoles of whom one likes to point out, in colored circles, that a good number of them must logically count among their ancestors such of these "hired personnel" or "thirty-six months" whose condition were a little different from that of the slaves or that of the prostitutes who, in ancient times, were sent to the islands for lack of sufficient female immigration. But within both categories, the consideration that an individual enjoys seems to depend above all on his economic situation: a white man with a formerly known name will be look upon as being poor in his own milieu (and just as well outside it) if he is in a difficult financial position, and those to whom in Martinique the appellation of "great mulattoes" is due, with the reputation of often being more haughty than the "*békés*", are the richest mulattoes. Thus, in addition to the element of color (a function of the genealogy that is much more attributed to the family than to the personal physical type), another element of appreciation, that of economic status, is added to define the social position of an individual. Between mulattoes and blacks, the racial prejudices, although not negligible, are not strong enough for the second element to more or less overshadow the first and for there to be a strict line of demarcation between the two categories: even if it means being ironically called a "fat mulatto" by ones fellowmen, as they sometimes say in Martinique to make fun of the Negro who has reached affluence, a Negro who has succeeded financially can, without much difficulty, join the intermediate category, while the poor mulatto, just like the Negro in lack, is nothing more than a "Negro", the "mulatto" properly speaking being the bourgeois of mixed blood who, in his way of behaving, shows a certain mannerism. Between native whites and people of color in general it is very different, because the prevention of the former with regards to the latter proves to be intransigent enough so that the race situation is never forgotten: a mulatto however clear and however great his fortune may be will never be recognized by the whites as one of their own, even if he regards himself as such; the most deplorable and despised white will always be a white, unless by misaligning he has aggregated himself to the colored milieu and (as some say) "nigrified"; the very poor whites, such as those of Grande-Terre or Saint-Barthélemy, are certainly thought of above all as "Matignons" or "Saint-Barths" but they are not denied the quality of whites. The consequence of this intransigence is that between the two categories white and mulatto there exists a sort of marginal category comprising individuals who are not clearly categorized: Whites who are broke as a result of a mismatch, barely colored mulattoes who claim to be white and are sometimes held to be so by a number of people of color without, however, being admitted by whites. Some hope that this marginal category will one day play the role of a link between the white and the colored fraction of society - a perspective that is perhaps overly optimistic, for if there are a few whites who are misaligned (which shows that prejudice has faded out in them), the persistent rigor of prejudice among other whites still makes them downgrade and if, on the other hand, the mulatto, who is different from the white by only the slightest nuance (or even the mere knowledge of his origins), is not recognized as a desirable part for a white Creole, it is because, despite all the signs of attenuation, a gap remains between the two fractions.

## Governing the unions (weddings): racial barriers

Generally speaking, it can be said that in the French West Indies, where so many race-to-race unions illegitimately take place without causing scandal and where the white society does not object to interracial marriage as long as the white spouse is the "second-class" white person from the metropolitan area, there are hardly any legitimate unions between native whites and people of color which, in the rare cases where such unions occur, are not highly repudiated by the white spouse's family and tend to make him or her ostracized from his/her category. From this rigidity (the effects of which are aggravated by the numerical narrowness of the West Indian milieu) it follows that expatriating oneself, contenting oneself, if need be, moving from one island to another, is the part that those who contract such unions will often choose as the wisest option, because the couple thus formed, if it remains on the spot, is very likely to experience a difficult material and moral situation, prejudicial to the harmony and stability of the household. It is important to emphasize that an affair not sanctioned by marriage, however it is judged, is far from arousing such strong reactions, at least when it is the affair of a white Creole with a person of color, for things can go further, up to insults and assaults, if it is a white Creole who has thus compromised herself. Although the fact dates back to a few years before the last war, many still speak in Guadeloupe of the altercation, followed by a fist fight, which occurred between the brothers of a married woman (belonging to one of the great local white families) and a man of color highly appreciated in the rich society of Saint-Claude, whose mistress she had become; However, after he had been divorced of his wife, the two culprits regularized their affair, which only brought the scandal to its height and drew upon the married woman the indignation of her milieu; this union finally ended in a separation, the legalization of which had put the spouses in a situation that was perhaps even more difficult than it had been up to then.

Whether a white Creole marries a person of color, or (even more exceptionally) a man of color marries a native white woman, as soon as there is a legal mixed union and the Martinican or Guadeloupean whites feel that one of their own has openly misallied, they refuse to accept this union and behave as if the white spouse had passed from the upper caste to which he/she belonged by virtue of his/her origin to the lower caste which is that of his partner; The one who has deviated in this way may personally retain some good relations in his/her former environment, but on the whole the couple will be kept apart and will be subject to all the practical disadvantages of being discredited in the eyes of the dominant class.

In white Creole families, the fear of misalliance leads to precautions that affect the sociability that families of this category can have with those of other categories. According to the expression of a man of color in Guadeloupe, from one white category to another, there are "public" relations but no "private" relations. When we meet outside, we exchange cordial words (although a white man, if he is accompanied by his wife or another female relative, is generally more distant towards his colored acquaintances than if he is alone); We see each other in church, in business, in official or semi-official meetings (such as receptions at the prefecture, Red Cross balls, awards ceremonies), sometimes even at home when it is a question, for example, of a charitable work; we also meet at major funerals, and some people even say jokingly that funerals and cockfights (the latter frequented almost exclusively by men) are the only occasions when unanimity is achieved between the races.

But white families generally do not want to mix with the other categories on celebrations that involve the union of the sexes (weddings) or relate more or less directly to procreation (baptisms) or to the growth of children (first communions); In such circumstances, the family that wishes to be kind will send, if necessary, announcements to its colored relations and it is not excluded that it goes as far as inviting a friend belonging to this category, but the latter, if he is tactful, will not

fail to abstain. As a white Guadeloupean teacher explained to me, the sort of *modus vivendi* that has been tacitly established between white Creoles and people of color allows for socializing, but with the understanding that "each person keeps his or her own little sphere of intimacy" and that opportunities for encounters between young men and women of the two groups are avoided because of the "inclinations" that might result; "It is the woman who, in short, is at the center of all this," my interlocutor added in substance, meaning by this, from his point of view as a White Creole, that the concern to remove the female element of the white category from any possibility of misalliance, in whatever form it might occur, is the primary source of this system of implicit rules.

However, it is still the norm in the French West Indies that –except among poor whites such as those of Saint-Barthélemy or the Saintes and the Matignons of Grande-Terre– the native white woman has no other occupation than housekeeping, apart from a few duties (good works, sociability, etc.) that may call her outside. If it is accepted for a white Creole to have (even outside of his professional obligations) friendly relations with people of color, these relations, which, in terms of economic cooperation, can be close enough to go as far as association, and it is not excluded that they become very affectionate, but should never be more than personal relations, in the sense that they remain practically limited to those who are thus linked, without the families concerned coming to see each other regularly: the men will see each other in town, will have lunch together in a restaurant; the white man, if need be, will go to his colored friend's house for a family party or any other occasion, but he will go alone and his own house will, at best, only open up from time to time for a moment of chat over punch or some other refreshment, and even more rarely for a meal which will keep, moreover, the character of a particular attention, ruling out any idea of equal worldly relations, even if the wife of the friend in question is also invited; on the other hand, a bourgeois woman of color will generally not wish to return such an invitation, either because she feels that she does not have an interior that would allow her to do so with the desired pomp, or because she prefers not to show herself eager for relations in the white category. The result of these practices is that the compartmentalization linked to the distinction between whites and coloreds is much more marked in the female fraction of society than in its male fraction; Consequently, one notices in colored circles, the tendency of the white Creole to shut herself up "in her ivory tower" and, given the little contact to which she is exposed, apart from her servants, with members of other categories (which, moreover, reduces the number of experiences likely to attenuate her rigorism), she is accused of being even stricter than the Creole white man, when it comes to the subject of discrimination.

Among these poor whites, who have virtually remained untouched according to European racial perspectives, the desire to maintain the integrity of the group is manifested in a sort of pure state, for their desire not to mix does not exclude the borrowing of many cultural traits from the very people with whom, in terms of marriage, they refuse to mix. Apart from the houses of Saint-Barthélemy, which were generally better conditioned than the houses inhabited in other islands by colored West Indians of the same social class, there was no appreciable difference between the houses of these whites and those of their colored neighbors. In Grands-Fonds du Moule in particular, the analogy is striking, when one crosses a series of identical hamlets, populated by people with identical clothes but some of whom are blacks while others are whites, an analogy which extends to bodily attitudes and which made me verify a slogan that someone applied to the Matignons in Guadeloupe: "These whites who have taken everything from the negroes, except the color..."

In the spheres of the great and middle bourgeoisie, with some exceptions always severely judged by the native white category which sees in racial endogamy the only "barricade" still erected between themselves and the other categories, a

Martinican or Guadeloupean white man therefore marries within his own milieu or, more rarely, in the metropolitan environment, and the concern that most white Creole parents have to avoid the possibility of a mixed marriage for their children largely determines the behavior of this category with regards to the people of color, in terms of social relations. Within the colored circles themselves, concerns of the same order are found, so that one commonly sees the mulattoes practicing an ostracism towards the Negroes equivalent to that of the white category wishing not to become "nigrified" and the Negroes as well as the mulattoes testifying to a certain reluctance to legitimately ally themselves with the Indians. This category was for a long time considered as the lowest and remains that of the "coolies" in spite of the economic and cultural ascent that it has now achieved in the person of many of its members.

## Racial Prejudice and Racism

- 16 It is clear from the above excerpt that these representations and behaviors are inspired by an obvious racial prejudice, at the very heart of social functioning, through the "cascade of contempt" that descends from the top to the bottom of the racial ladder. But can we label this prejudice as racism?

### The prejudice

Though it is perfectly understood that in Martinique and Guadeloupe race does not determine in a mechanical way the belonging to a certain social class but constitutes at the most an element (in any case uncertain) of *presumption* of such a belonging, if it is indisputable that it is not practiced there nowadays –except, in the sphere of private relations, and this on a strictly customary level, as far as marriage is concerned– no *open* racial discrimination, either official or unofficial, is practiced (the belonging to one or the other category not being mentioned in the civil status and not appearing on the papers; with all being entitled to the same services and jobs regardless of their color, and no district or meeting place being expressly closed to any category that is considered undesirable). It was clear that the racial prejudice introduced by the white settlers continued to prevail and that the notion of race was constantly present, both implicitly, or explicitly, in the life of the community, and that no class of West Indian society could be considered exempt from this after-effect of the slavery era.

More fluid between mulattoes and blacks, the racial prejudice thus remains quite intact on the part of the whites Creole with regards to all those whom they consider to be "colored" and with whom they refuse to mix through marriage, though accepting to have good relations with them, according to a *modus vivendi* from which the man of color who wishes to preserve his entry into the white milieu will do well not to depart.

“There is, ‘write Tocqueville’, a natural prejudice which leads a man to despise the one who had been his inferior, long after the inferior one has become his equal; compared to the real inequality produced by fortune or the law, an imaginary inequality which has its roots in morals always prevails; but among the ancients, this secondary effect of slavery had an end. The freedman so strongly resembled the men of free origin, that it soon became impossible to distinguish him among them. The most difficult thing for the ancients was to change the law; with the moderns, it is to change morals, and, for us, the difficulty begins where antiquity saw it end. This comes from the fact that among the moderns, the immaterial and fleeting fact of slavery is combined in the most disastrous manner with the material



and permanent fact of the difference of race: the memory of slavery dishonors the race, and the race perpetuates the memory of slavery."

If it is possible for a man of color to rise, thanks to the present institutions, in the hierarchy of *classes*, the final promotion that could represent in his eyes equality with whites on the level of *categories* remains forbidden to him because, even if he may be esteemed and received, he remains an undesirable from the point of view of marriage and, within the restricted framework in which the life of Martinican society and Guadeloupean society takes place; the origins of each one are, moreover, too well known for him to hope that a series of judicious marriages will result in his descendants "crossing the line", if not in a problematic future and why not in the most distant future; the establishment on the continent representing, in the best of cases, the only practical means to reduce to nothing the original defect. As long as the essential demand of the colored masses was to obtain the full equality of rights which the reform of 1848 had granted to them in principle; the "fusion" with the white category appeared –as well as equality in matters of education and effective non-discrimination in the exercise of all functions– as one of the principal aspirations of those who represented the enlightened fraction of these masses and at the same time the ones best able to feel with bitterness the ostracism of the whites, that is to say, the mulattoes. Now that legal equality has been achieved, social demands have come to the forefront and we see the men of color, Blacks, or mulattoes, who are the spokesmen, abandoning the traditional perspective of categories and posing their problems in terms of class struggle. Certainly, the racial question is still important and one can, without bad faith, speak (as many observers do) of an intrusion of color into the political domain: a black man is in a better position than another to become a popular leader, because he is more easily trusted on the basis of his physical appearance alone and, moreover, he is, as a rule, closer to the people because of his origin; A white Creole candidate in the municipal elections of his commune can jokingly declare himself a "chabin" with the certainty that this declaration, which brings him closer to his voters, will be taken seriously; finally, as we have seen in Guadeloupe, it is not without significance that political divisions roughly overlap with ethnic divisions. However, regardless of the role of the factions (independent of the division of classes and races, but linked to the play of legitimate or illegitimate kinship, to the quasi-feudal relations of such notables of all colors with their peasant clientele, to parochial patriotism, or even to pure and simple corruption), one observes, on the part of the intellectuals of the new generation who have become involved in the political struggle, a desire to relegate to the background what is the sole racial self-love and to remember only that, in the present social situation, it is still the blacks who, according to a still valid, although approximate, scheme represent the economically lower class and the whites the dominant class.

In the case of mulattoes, as in the case of native whites, considerations of class are mixed with considerations of race, and intransigence in this matter will in most cases be all the greater when they belong to a higher economic background. Thus it is especially in the families of the upper middle-class mulatto that contempt for Negroes is found; and in this milieu, which is all the more skeptical not to be confused with the mass of people of color, since it has gained a foothold in the sphere of those whites from whom it is nevertheless separated by certain racial differences, one will find individuals who are likely to justify to some degree the accusation sometimes made against mulattoes by white Creoles who like to note that "the most racist" among the West Indies are often members of this category. If, however, we except these few families –and such poor mulattoes as those who live in Martinique near the La Monnerot estate in the commune of Le François and who, close to whites in their physical type, refuse to marry "négresses"– these colored circles, although commonly imbued with the idea that it is desirable to marry someone more European than oneself, prove on the whole to be less fastidious on the question of racial differences than is the case in the white Creole milieu. In

these circles, the norm is, of course, that one marries between people who by their physical type fall into the same category, but this norm is far from being a rule. On the one hand (even in Guadeloupe, where the distinction between mulattoes and blacks seems objectively clearer) one passes, from the one who is not entirely white to the one who is entirely black, through a range of intermediaries that is too diverse to allow for a strict division, and on the other hand a game of compensations takes place, from the situation of race to the situation of class, so that –without mentioning cases where personal inclination appears to be the determining factor– one will commonly see a darker person marrying a lighter one, provided that the balance is restored between them by the economically inferior position of the latter in relation to the former, or the more or less brilliant future which seems to be promised to the latter. In the conversations which gives rise to marriage, in Guadeloupe as in the rest of the West Indies and practically in all countries, one will not fail to note, among other things which can be brought to the assets or liabilities of each of the spouses, the advantage or disadvantage that one can have on the other from the point of view of situation, beauty, etc. However (according to Mr. Rémy Nainsouta, who is rightly considered to be one of the most knowledgeable Guadeloupeans vis-à-vis local customs), if each marriage is thus the object of a kind of judgment, it is almost a game and one cannot conclude from this fact alone that, on the ground of race, there are deep divisions within the colored society.

## Prejudice and Cross-Subjectivations: preventions between categories

Whether it is a question of relations between white and colored natives, between mulattoes and “Nègres”, between natives of European or African origin, or of the mixture of the two races and natives of Asian origin (among whom only the Hindus continue to form a separate category, the few families of Chinese origin that one meets in Martinique have more or less joined the mulatto society through marriage). Everything happens as if the attitude of each of these groups responds to certain preconceived ideas that make them prefer not to merge with such other groups. In both islands, out of the large number of people who can be presumed to be moved by such ideas, almost all those with whom one has the opportunity to discuss on this with deny being “racist” and, when the subject is broached, are generally inclined to denounce the racism of other categories rather than explaining the racism of which they are suspected; the prejudices are thus not always immediately apprehensible in their clear expression; however, if direct questioning hardly makes it possible to unmask them, they reveal themselves sooner or later in such remarks captured on the fly, from encounter to encounter and from conversation to conversation.

From the direct testimonies and other information that I have gathered on this point it certainly seems to emerge that, for many white Creoles, the desire not to mix is not accompanied by any conscious belief in the inferiority of the black race. He also assures us that, as a general rule, white Creoles do not formulate any specific grievance against blacks and people of color, but, like him, they hold in esteem the “blood purity”; when expressing what he, in the absence of any contempt, he feels about people of color, he uses a gesture that can be observed in all Guadeloupean and Martinican circles and that is endowed with the same symbolic meaning: he shows, with the index finger or the index and middle finger of his right hand, the bare skin of his left forearm, and says only: “The skin...”. According to this interlocutor, there would thus be notable psychological differences between the Blacks and the Whites, in addition to the physical differences; in fact, he defends himself from assigning to these differences a hierarchical scope.

The "békés" are criticized not only for owning most of the land but also for being generally settled on the best sites, and for "doing nothing for the country", and the way in which, as a general rule, they hold each other more closely than do the people of color is also noted; however, they are recognized as authentic Martinicans, and some will point out that many of the "békés" of the countryside speak Creole better than the young bourgeois of color and have a closer contact with the mass of the population.

In Guadeloupe, as in Martinique, the working classes people of color certainly feel, their condition as "nègres" and think willingly that the destiny of the nègre is to be, as such, oppressed by the White. Although, one finds that the racial prejudice that prevails in the white Creole milieu is mostly criticized in those social strata that are high enough to see themselves as subject to a bias ostracism that cannot be explained by the mere difference in economic class.

Or, of the white Creoles taken as a whole, it could be said that they are even more so strict about their prejudices because they know very well that they are not absolutely white and are afraid of being confused with people of color: a white Creole will definitely have one-sixteenth of black blood because "he will always have a such grandmother..." said a black Guadeloupean woman from the teaching profession, while an almost white mulatto friend of hers assured me that it is not uncommon to find white Creole women who have had affairs outside their race; This slander goes hand in hand with the assertions of certain colored men who declare, in a tone of indulgence, that they understand very well why the white men keep their women away, for they fear of becoming the laughing stock of their milieu, such failures will risk presenting, in this case, significantly visible results.

In general we can say that there does not exist among Martinicans and Guadeloupeans of color a feeling of racial superiority which would be the replica of that which most whites feel towards them; even those who present themselves as being the most acerbic towards the white Creoles limit themselves to attacking them as this category merges roughly with the economically dominant class and to raise up against them –without omitting to underline ironically what absurdity there may be in this and what unfortunate consequences may result for their very posterity– the more or less distant attitude to which they are led by a pride of race which, in the eyes of the most educated members of the colored population, seems all the more unjustified because it cannot be based on a primacy that should be accorded them in matters of culture.

Traditionally, the mulatto category represents in the French West Indies the category par excellence from which the members of the liberal professions are recruited, and which provides the greater part of the executives in the public and private sectors; for a long time, the white Creoles in most cases did not have to worry about pushing their studies beyond the minimum indispensable for the management of enterprises, and the Negroes found themselves practically deprived of all means of culture, whereas education was offered to a number of mulattos as a means of social elevation.<sup>7</sup> The feeling of superiority that the mulatto generally feels towards the Negro has a double aspect: racial, since he can boast of having whites among his ancestors; cultural, since he belongs to the category of color that was educated first, and whose most educated fraction still constitutes the bulk of the *intelligentsia* today. Racial pride in the strict sense of the word will commonly take the form of a valorization of physical types –often very beautiful, in fact– resulting from miscegenation and of which it is well known that, at least as far as girls and women are concerned, even the whites who are most imbued with their superiority are far from being insensitive to it: Such a mulatto will praise the "range" of very varied types between which a man of color can exercise his matrimonial choice; on the other hand, it is a fact that it is to the mulatto woman – in whom the amalgam of the two great black and white races to which Martinique and Guadeloupe owe the essential of their settlement is manifested– that it is primarily up to her to incarnate the classic Antillean (West Indian) woman, the one

whose beauty, in the eyes of the Antilleans as well as of the non-Antilleans, seems to sum up the particular charm of the islands. Certain moral qualities that mulattoes would be specially endowed with among other West Indians –quick-wittedness, a sense of honor, a taste for life in the open– would also be valued, and their ways of being would be represented as the most typical of Creole customs in all their originality and endearment.

The racial hierarchy of the West Indian society, which is traditionally divided into several categories; the highest of which, that of the Whites, is in a privileged position, does not fail to have its psychological consequences; it is normal that in such conditions people of color feel inferior, hence their frequent susceptibility and the ease with which they think they are victims of "racism" whenever for any reason they are or feel aggrieved; the reactions which whites, returning the favor, gets interpreted as signs of the racial acrimony that people of color would feel towards them.

White Creoles, for their part, often give similar interpretations to facts which nothing suggests that they are due to some malice on the part of people of color. More generally, the left-wing politician or the colored trade unionist who opposes whites, not as whites, but as representatives of a class which he considers to be harshly exploiting colored workers, will be called a Negro racist or "anti-white". A man of color will be judged in the same way if he complains that whites do not treat him as an equal, or even simply if he considers –making a judgment which irrespective of whether it is based on considerations that are not racial but political– that, despite the change in status, such and such a West Indian problem persists in being considered in a "colonialist" spirit.

That Martinicans and Guadeloupeans of color tend to believe themselves as being victims of prejudice, in many cases where such an interpretation would appear to be at most hypothetical to a detached observer, that they sometimes (it would seem) go so far as to deliberately use it as an alibi, and that the whites of the two islands on the other hand impute to them, with abuse, a racial feeling which would sometimes set them against the whites as such and sometimes push them to seek their good graces in order to achieve vain satisfaction, what is certain is that a reciprocal suspicion weighs more or less constantly on the relations between white natives and colored natives, so that between the two groups, even outside the social compartmentalization, there is a series of screens that are other reasons for disagreement. However, one observes that such prejudices only come to manifest themselves in a virulent manner on the occasion of conflicts situated on the ground of class distinctions: labor conflicts; marriages of young people of different education and level of fortune, or at least whose union is perceived as an attack on the traditional hierarchical order based on the old class relations. In short, everything happens as though prejudices, admitting that they exist as such (but the color of the skin and the nature of the hair are indeed affected by a direct social significance, since they are enough to discredit or, on the contrary, to valorize, by revealing a kinship with the former slaves), were only introduced as a possible aggravating factor in a situation which, if the protagonists belonged to the same ethnic group, would be tense anyway.

There is talk of an attenuation of the racial prejudices that divide West Indian society into hierarchical categories, and there is no shortage of evidence of an appreciable evolution in this area as the memory of slavery becomes more diffuse, referring to a more distant era: without taking into accounts (their number being too small and white disapproval persisting) the few mixed marriages that take place, the less strict discrimination in the social relationships, the associations in business, the increase of contacts in official meetings, charity celebrations, etc., or within the framework of trade unions, secular or denominational youth organizations, and other cultural organizations are unmistakable signs of this evolution. It has long been noted that the rigor of prejudice does not prevent whites and people of color originating from the same island, who know each other but do

not meet in ordinary times, from exchanging cordial effusions on occasion if they meet in France. It is also noted that in certain places of vacation or "change of scenery" –in Vernou, for example, in Guadeloupe (Basse-Terre)– it happens that people who, in the city, keep their distance from each other frequent each other; in the same way, on the transatlantic ships, a sort of neutral ground where, moreover, the neighborhood is forced, certain liberties are taken between members of various categories.

## The racialization of conflicts

Besides those who see racial prejudice as being on extinction in the French West Indies, there are some who are less optimistic and think, on the contrary, that race relations are now more tense than ever and who accuse the leaders of the colored masses of stirring up racial hatreds and making political use of them. Although these two assessments seem at first glance to be absolutely contradictory, an impartial examination of the situation shows that there is a very apparent contradiction here, which is explained by a confusion, committed by many, between racial and social conflicts: racial prejudice (in the strict sense) is certainly tending to fade, but class antagonisms between people of different races are intensifying as the colored masses, becoming educated, become more demanding; In practice, and without there being any reason to consider the representatives of the working classes as "racist", the labor conflicts –which appear to be by far the most serious, since they disrupt the economy and sometimes lead to bloodshed– revert to racial conflicts, since the colored proletariat is pitted against whites. The Church criticizes the West Indian communists for promoting racial discord, while the Church itself preaches concord, but the communists are, in truth, rather debating the class struggle, not racial hatred. The paradox here is that these "politicians", who are accused of stirring up trouble between the races, are the very ones who, because of their emphasis on economic determinants, are led to liquidate the tendency of too many people of color to continually frame their problems in terms of racial discrimination.

When a strike breaks out –as it almost regularly does at harvest time, when the cane cutters return to work– it is individuals differing not only in social status but also in race who find themselves in conflict: on the one hand the white employers and their executives, on the other the colored labor force. If this strike gave rise to incidents, and camps are being constituted, and this between people of different races such that blood is shed: in Carbet on March 8, 1948, a colored striker was killed by gendarmes (i.e., by metropolitan whites); in the Basse-Pointe region on September 6 of the same year, it was the white Creole administrator of the Leyritz dwelling who fell under the blows of colored workers; in Guadeloupe on February 14, 1952, it was the C.R.S. (metropolitan whites) who killed several people of color in the town of Le Moule.

Although these labor conflicts and the violence that can result from them are essentially episodes of what in Marxist language is called class struggle, it is inevitable, given the respective affiliations of their protagonists, that they be interpreted, rightly or wrongly, according to an ethnic perspective, where the racial notions intervene next to the cultural ones and are generally more or less mixed with them (such a confusion of these two orders of notions being moreover at the base of the hostility which can pit two races against each other as such): an employer who has difficulty in recruiting his workforce blames the atavistic laziness he attributes to people of color or, at least, the lack of incentive to work that results from their modest needs; conversely, the proponents of the workers attack the "racism" of the whites, who argue that their modest needs and the fact that one of the traits of the West Indian character is that he prefers working less than improving his standard of living, just to show himself as being parsimonious in matters of wages. That a native white man such as M. Guy de Fabrique became the

unfortunate victim of a labor dispute, his fellowmen –overlooking the fact that he himself had intervened armed and escorted by gendarmes– insisted on the "brutality" with which he was murdered and on the bloodthirsty instincts that this denotes in his murderers; At the same time, they denounce the "anti-white" propaganda of a particular regional leader, forgetting that it is hard to imagine, given the social structure of the country, how the anti-business propaganda in Martinique could not be aimed at whites. Finally, a police force felt that it must use its weapons against demonstrators, and a good part of the opinion of the colored population believe that the crackdown would certainly have been less severe if the gendarmes or the C.R.S. had reacted against whites and not against people of color. This ease with which a conflict between workers of color and representatives of the employer or the police is racialized (if one may say so) can be seen in the personal disputes that may arise between a white individual and an individual belonging to another category. While an altercation between people of the same color is usually without serious consequences, it takes on a more harmful significance if members of different categories are pitted against each other, for it is no longer a question of individuals per se: whether or not the racial argument is made by the protagonists of such a dispute, their particular persons tend to be overshadowed by the traditionally recognized categories to which they are symbols.

## Anti-white racism?

[...] Many whites reproach the opinion of the people of color for bringing into the racial arena (or that of the general relations between metropolitans and natives) disputes which they felt should not be considered from that angle –the two parties, in short, passing the buck and accusing each other of being driven by considerations of origin or race, which amounts to accusing each other of racism.

It is clear that the question of race arises at all times in Martinique and Guadeloupe, both among the privileged and among those who rank among the abased and offended. Before trying to determine to what extent these concerns may be based on class perspectives that are equivalent in many other societies, and to what extent they may, conversely, amount here to something that is irreducible to the economic structure of West Indian society. [...]

Of course, it is not excluded that, even outside the immediate labor conflicts, native whites may be subject to open hostility from people of color, but this hostility will be directed at them as representatives of an antagonistic class and not of a reprobate race; if it can happen (as I was told by one of those who were often teased) that white Creoles driving around are called "dirty *békés*" by workers who have just received their pay, the very meaning of the word "*béké*", the content of which is not strictly racial, added to the particular circumstances of the incident, can only lead one to thinking that it is not whites as such, but the rich (practically white) who are thus insulted. The "racism" that so many whites impute to people of color is therefore not exactly symmetrical to the one they denounce among native whites: when it is not reduced to a distrust or, occasionally, an enmity felt by people of poor classes towards those whose color seems to indicate that they are privileged, it manifests itself essentially as the reaction of an abased group towards another group, which its historical prestige and what it has been able to maintain of its former supremacy confirm in its belief that it is of a superior nature. If there is "racism" in colored circles, or a belief in the intrinsic superiority of the group to which one belongs by birth, it appears more as a reflection than as a counterpart of that of the whites and is expressed in the relations of mulattoes to Negroes, of Negroes of older settlement to Negroes of more recent settlement ("Congo" Negroes), of West Indians of color to African Negroes, and of West Indians of more or less African descent to West Indians of Hindu descent.

Although among certain rich men of color, in business relations with white society which more or less accepts them, there is a tendency to minimize (at least in

appearance) the persistent importance attached to the distinction of colors, the bourgeois mulatto, placed in an intermediate position, will easily resent the white man for not being admitted by him and, at the same time, will keep the negro at a distance, considering him as being rude: "Someone has said it with truth, wrote Victor Schœlcher, a mulatto hates his father and despises his mother." Because of this very situation, he will find himself, on the other hand, exposed to being judged with particular severity on the side of both the Blacks and the Whites: the Blacks will readily accuse him of being an auxiliary of the factory owners or other owners and will even go so far as to speak of him as a "bastard"; many Whites, insofar as they see in him a possible rival whose attitude is not always as devoted and deferential as they would wish, will tend to address him, as a natural vice, this "perfidy" or "insolence" which, according to Tacitus, the Roman patricians denounced among the freedmen; On the other hand, such a great white Guadeloupean will speak, for example, of the "inflation" of the colored elites, reproaching the local intellectuals for believing themselves to be superior people, whereas in France their more polite and humble attitude earned them a sympathy that was beneficial to their studies. However, it is certain, in any case, that such a situation constitutes a favorable ground for the development of that more or less shady susceptibility often noted as one of the principal traits of the West Indian character: the members of these intermediate categories (especially those of the middle classes, whom only the prejudices of the white Creoles prevent from having, with at least some of them, the relations of sociability that they would consider normal) are all the more inclined to take offense, considering that they are treated as "negroes," because they know well that they are partially so, but also know that by one side of their ancestry they approach those whites who seem to take so little account of them.

## Definitions of Racism

In regions where, as in the French West Indies, citizenship is a given for all natives and where there is no "color barrier" (i.e., a set of prohibitions, the most visible of which affect, for example, neighborhoods, premises, and vehicles, and which, whatever their nature, are aimed at systematically establishing a segregation of the population), one would be inclined towards thinking that the old colonial prejudices concerning the unconditional primacy that people of the white race would have, simply by virtue of belonging to one race, over those of the other races, are no longer strong enough to play a continuous role in collective life. While it is certain that in Martinique and Guadeloupe, *racism in the strict sense* (taking the form of a more or less coherent doctrine affirming the congenital superiority of a group and, in a concerted way, prescribing a policy that adequate to this idea of superiority<sup>8</sup>) can be considered as being practically absent, it is nonetheless true that one sees there a manifestation of *racism in the broad sense*: solidarity, at least occasional, between the members of a group based on a certain identity of origin which expresses physical analogies, particularistic spirit tending to set the groups constituted thus against one another, with the privileged group willing to maintain its racial integrity at the same time as its socially preponderant position. The existence of this state of mind, which attests to a latent racism in the absence of an aggressively proclaimed racism, is evident in the functioning of an institution such as legal marriage and, on the level of simple social relations, in all circumstances considered to be conducive to the development of an inclination which could lead to marriage.

## The relations between metropolitans and natives

- 17 Michel Leiris finally evoked the entry of the metropolitans on the scene, who have become much more numerous than before with the setting up of the

departmentalization and the administration that it applies, and which are not part of the original West Indian racial equation.

## Metropolitans in the West Indies

Alongside the various groups among which the West Indian population is divided: white Creoles, mulattoes, blacks, Indians, all of whom were French citizens, as well as native-born West Indians, there was a relatively large and socially vast group of French people from Europe who resided for varying periods of time in Martinique and Guadeloupe, either in public office (civil or military), in the clergy, or in business, banking, trade, etc. The term "metropolitans" continues to designate these French people just as France, despite the transformation of the two West Indian colonies into departments, it has remained the "métropole".

Whether a teacher, merchant, gendarme, C.R.S., etc., as a general rule, the metropolitan white man, unlike the Creole white man, did not raise any major objection to mixing with the colored population through marriage. In the position of a colonialist who has expatriated himself (most often temporarily) in view of certain specific advantages and sometimes by vocation, he obviously has his prejudices as every individual has his own, without the exception of the author of this study; however, his prejudices necessarily differ, at least to a small extent, from those of the White Creoles, for he has received another training, does not refer exactly to the same traditions and is, moreover –unlike the White Creole who is a colonist– in a situation that is *foreign* to some degree. Often married, the question of a legal mixed union does not arise for him and, in any case, because he is not inserted into the framework of local categories, in spite of his status as a White, he has much more freedom in this area. Generally speaking, the colored population will be grateful to him for his broader ideas on racial matters than those of the white Creoles, but most metropolitans will be reproached for making such ideas so cheaply perceptible and for quickly aligning their behavior, at least externally, with that of the white Creoles; the interest they have in having good relations with this powerful group, the efforts of the latter to win over some of them, and the obligation in which they are not to violate the established norms if they want the benevolence of the dominant class, would push them, willingly or unwillingly, to this imitation.

On the other hand, given his ignorance of the habits and customs of a country where most people take offense all the more easily because they belong to a race that has been abased for centuries, the metropolitan, even if it is from the best of intentions, often commits blunders and is seen, for example, as imbued with his superiority when, in expressing a demand or giving advice, he neglects to follow the proper format. Finally, in addition to the fact that he presents himself to the eyes of the educated man of color as his direct competitor either in the State organizations or in the private sector, he is, whatever his function, a representative of the metropolis from whom one is inclined to expect the maximum and whom one will be inclined to judge with a severity directly proportional to this expectation. It is not surprising that under such conditions contact between the whites from Europe and the natives (including the Creole whites, who were also West Indians in comparison with those who arrived from France) gave rise to some friction.

Generally speaking, the metropolitan residents in the West Indies believe that their ideas on racial matters were more democratic than those of the Creole whites, and the fact is that their attitude towards marriage and in social relations with the people of color was much less rigorous.

The most enlightened metropolitans with whom I had the opportunity to converse, and to whom I am indebted for most of my information, obviously did not make such summary generalizations about the Martinicans or Guadeloupeans of color and sometimes showed them a great deal of understanding and sympathy. However, even among metropolitans that are mindful not to say anything too



hazardous, I noticed a tendency to adopt (without even taking care) a racial point of view while they deplored the "racism" which rages in the various West Indian circles: everything, here, becomes a matter of "skin color"...

## West Indians in France

However, there are West Indians of color who attest that it is in France, when they went to study there, that they became aware of their race and found themselves as an object of prejudice vis-à-vis the Whites; This reaction, which at first sight seems paradoxical, considering what we know about the prejudice of color such as it rages in the West Indies, can be explained to a large extent by the fact that these West Indians, then at the threshold of adulthood and placed in a different setting from the one they were used to (that is to say in a situation conducive to discoveries) found themselves in contact with people who, unlike the Creole whites, were not used to meeting people of color and could make them feel, even without prejudice, that they were considered as belonging to a particular human variety...

In short, the West Indian of color who finds himself in France notices on every occasion that he is looked upon less as an individual but as the representative of a defined species from whom a certain type of behavior is expected and, following the expression of Dr. Frantz Fanon, he feels "overdetermined from the outside", a slave to his own "appearance" who is literally "fixed" by white looks. For too many white men and women, people of color belong almost indiscriminately to a human group deeply marked by primitivism, and it appears that many whites in the metropolis profess ideas in this regard that are not radically different from those of many Creole whites; to be convinced of this, one only needs to listen to the words of certain metropolitans established in the West Indies and converse with others.

## A new approach to "anti-white racism"

Mostly severe in their judgments about the white Creoles –to whom they reproach (with a few rare exceptions) their racial prejudices, their routine spirit, their preoccupation with money, the pride of caste which makes some of them difficult to approach– the metropolitans are almost unanimous in deploring that Antillean "racism" does not only affect the descendants of colonists but extends to the whole population of color. They point out that many representatives of this population (starting with white mulattoes and men of color married to metropolitan women, i.e., those who may feel most bitterly that they are not absolutely assimilated to white men) are animated by "anti-white" feelings. However, the facts generally invoked in support of this thesis are, to say the least, unconvincing.

[...] My commensal having told me that the communist newspaper, *L'Étincelle*, had published articles on this case that were tainted with "racism", and I insisted –and this insofar as I attached more weight to this assertion than if it had come from some other witness– on obtaining the issues in which the incriminated texts appeared; in truth, the editors of *L'Étincelle* interpreted the incident and the court's decision as a mark of the "colonialist and racist attitude" of the government and its representatives, whom they accused of practicing "racial discrimination", an interpretation that can obviously be rejected as fallacious, *but that can only be considered racist on one condition: to consider that racism is defined by the simple belief in the racism of men of the other race. In this case, it must be emphasized, any White person who, on the basis of insufficiently analyzed facts, accuses people of color of "anti-white" racism would be behaving like a racist himself*<sup>9</sup>.

The most trivial incidents of daily life are interpreted by some as the marks of this feeling of hostility towards whites [...]. It seems that we are touching the essence of the dispute: Since whites as a whole represent on the one hand the economically dominant class and on the other hand the metropolis where the major public authorities are located, any white person is necessarily more exposed than another

to mistrust, even in the absence of any "racist" feeling; for it to be otherwise, it would first be necessary for whites and people of color to cease to be practically the two opposing parties in professional competitions and labor conflicts, which would obviously imply a radical change in the social structure.

If it is not rash to affirm that in the present conditions –those in which Martinique and Guadeloupe find themselves since their departmentalization– one finds no valid reason to impute to the population of color, a feeling that would set them against the whites as people of another race, it is nonetheless true that the memory of the old slavery era still weighs heavily on interracial relations and that Martinicans and Guadeloupeans of color are extremely sensitive to everything which may seem to them to be a sequel to the old inequality of rights, and this perhaps even more so in their relations with metropolitan residents, the latter (however they behave) not benefiting from the traditional habituation that exist with the white Creoles.

## The non-habituation of the metropolitans to the customs of the country...

The metropolitans are reproached for only associating among themselves, although, being less numerous and therefore more isolated, they were more willing to join the colored society. For their part, most of the metropolitans complained of encountering the objection of the community of color.

Such lapses in manners, which may be considered minor, are no less serious when committed against people who are generally form-conscious and, moreover, more disposed than others to take offense, because of the contempt openly shown for generations to those who were not whites; what, coming from some other person, they might not pay any attention to, has, if it comes from a white person from the metropolis, a more serious meaning, because a whole past of humiliation is thus recalled, by someone who cannot enjoy the privilege (granted more or less to the native whites, whatever one may think of them) of traditionally constituting the aristocracy of the country.

That since that time (or since the Liberation, which, according to some, was followed by a disappointment because it gave the impression that racism would finally be liquidated) the population of color has been inclined to a mistrust likely to lead it to judge metropolitans more severely, the fact remains that grievances are commonly formulated against those who have come to Martinique and Guadeloupe since the departmentalization. While under the colonial regime, it is said, a certain number of metropolitans "having become part of the country", had married there or, like M. Eugène Revert, had studied and made solid friendships there, the civil servants of today –except for those of the University, who still have happy contacts with the population– give the impression of "having no traits", of having come "to make money" and of drawing from the advantages of enjoying a feeling of superiority over their native colleagues. They are also accused of wanting to "shake things up" and of looking at the country as their own, simply because the first occupants were the French colonists, the African slaves having only been imported later. Finally, some of them, who had studied or worked in France, felt that they were treated in a more egalitarian manner by their comrades or colleagues than they were here, and others who (as is the case with many West Indians of color) had held a position in one of the colonial territories of the French Union complained that they were assimilated to "natives" by the metropolitans, whereas in Black Africa or Indochina they were treated like Europeans.

[...] Tired after a while by the climate, irritated by the island isolation and by the small town atmosphere where one spies on another, those of the metropolitans who have not been pushed towards the islands by a vocation such that they will make good use of troubles for which they will recognize that an inestimable amount of beauty is there to compensate them, are frequently led to feel towards the colored

people who constitute the mass of the population an animosity to which their spite is not foreign. "I am becoming a racist", so will say the one who complains of being mistrusted and, seeing in this unfriendly attitude as proof of a racial feeling exerted against him, considers himself entitled to becoming a racist too. White Creoles, when they observe such a development on the part of a metropolitan, will not fail to take note of it and some of them will tell you maliciously that many metropolitans, who at first accuse them of racism, become "after six months" even more racist than they themselves are.

[...] Vis-à-vis individual relations, understanding is, in fact, easier when the respective positions exclude, from the outset, any spirit of competition and any feeling of frustration influencing a partner who is worried about being recognized as an equal and considers that, from this point of view, his color, which is unjustly considered, constitutes his only handicap. Many people of color –belonging to that *intelligentsia*, which is too quick to criticize so that, in the targeted milieu, it is not accused of purely and simply having "hatred for the white man" in more or less veiled forms– affirm moreover that, in spite of the frictions and misunderstandings, one cannot consider the gap as definitively dug between metropolitans and natives of color. It would be a dangerous mistake, however, to see in these recriminations against the attitude of today's metropolitans –considered as not being equal to their fellow creatures of yesteryear– the sporadic expression of the bad temper of a few chagrined spirits and to think that, as far as the majority of Martinicans and Guadeloupeans are concerned, their attachment to the metropolis can only have been strengthened by the law of departmentalization.

## Departmentalization and the future of the West Indies

- 18 Michel Leiris finally talked of the political problems linked to the departmentalization and the disappointments with this new status which he sees emerging during his investigation.

Not only were people irritated by the slowness with which the social measures (security, family allowances, etc.) setup by the new regime were implemented, but they also tended to blame this slowness to the difficulties of the current situation in the metropolis and would probably not have been lesser under colonial rule. White Creoles and other white businessmen were generally hostile to this law, which forced them to pay higher wages and to assume social costs (which not only hindered them financially but, they said, encouraged the workforce to work less). The colored bourgeoisie saw this as a pretext for sending in civil servants, which made them fear that they would be eliminated from all positions of authority; their reaction was very strong with regard to the advantages that the State had seen fit to grant to its agents who had come from the metropolis, on the one hand, because of the living conditions that were actually more inconvenient for non-natives and, on the other hand, with the aim of alleviating the difficulties of recruitment, which were notable in a country where the people appeared, on the whole, to be reluctant to expatriate themselves.

Although it responded to a long-standing wish, departmentalization seems to have led, up to now, to the paradoxical result that people think of themselves as more "Martinican" or "Guadeloupean" than at the time when complete integration into the metropolis had not been achieved, politically speaking. According to the deputy-mayor of Pointe-à-Pitre, M. Valentino, who was the main opponent of the departmentalization law when it was debated in Parliament, the excessive centralization that it seemed to imply tended to put the French West Indians in a position of "national minority".

Among the noticeably young people who are studying in Paris, there are now some who, in the light of the world crisis, are asking themselves the question of national independence and, from a cultural point of view, are taking an interest in the

Creole language, conceived as the West Indian language, that their elders did not have. However, it seems likely that the attitude towards the representatives of the metropolis would stiffen definitively if the change in legal status enacted by the law of 19 March 1946 did not bring about the significant improvements expected on the very immediate level of material life.

However, although there are no legal traces of it left, their former condition has not ceased to weigh heavily on them, since even today a Negro in the French West Indies is generally a poor worker in front of his white employer, and the legitimate union between colored and white natives remains an object of scandal for the latter [...].

The question of overcrowding is posed in more abrupt terms; however, it interferes with that of interracial relations only insofar as, under the present conditions, the high density of the population is an aggravating factor of the low standard of living of the population of color, and the solutions, sometimes advocated, would inevitably be interpreted as imbued with "racism", consisting in not adopting any measure likely to encourage the birth rate (which would be felt as discriminatory) or in arousing a migratory flow towards French Guyana (which would take for most of them the meaning of an invitation to exile in an ungrateful region, or even of a kind of deportation). This serious question aside, the conflicts between the white "factory" and the colored labor force represent the most difficult problem, because it is difficult to see how it could be resolved without a profound transformation of the economic structure of the two islands. But here we encounter the great social dilemmas facing the whole contemporary world, and *it is not appropriate for the dispassionate observer that it is the ethnographer<sup>10</sup>* that is expected to engage in this terrain.

- 19 In reading these excerpts, one can see how far ahead of his time Michel Leiris was in thinking about the racial question. Certainly, his understanding of the notion of race is not without essentialism. This was the early 1950s, when there was still a confused belief in the objective reality of race (or human "races", which he sometimes even described as "pure"). He was in fact in the theoretical line opened in anthropology by Boas and Kroeber, relayed in France by Paul Rivet, director of the Musée de l'Homme (as attested by the journal *Races et racism*, published from 1937 to 1939, in association with the institution). These anthropologists consider that there are obvious phenotypic, hereditary differences within the human species, but they do not imply inequality in their eyes. Moreover, they believe that, far more than heredity, "culture" –the ways in which different societies make sense of the world and practically organize community life in accordance with this system of representations– is therefore central to the human experience. Though they continue to have a racialized view of human diversity, describing populations in racial terms (although we should mention people who, as early as the 1930s, oppose this view, such as Henri Neuville<sup>11</sup>). The social, cultural, and political significance of these categorizations, however, is already perceived and analyzed. By focusing mainly on the racial question through a field analysis, Leiris is a pioneer in terms of academic reflection in France, in a different register where Frantz Fanon, who is also cited in the text, shared an era. He perceived the arbitrariness and thus constructed race character, but the language and concepts were not yet there to enable him to conceptualize it. His analysis nevertheless remarkably points out the components of the racial criterion (within the framework of what can be designated by the term "colorism"): appreciation of individuals according to their physical appearance and according to their genealogy, giving rise to multiple categories of classification, and leading to social practices, marked by rapprochements or avoidances, notably in matters of matrimonial alliances. However, it remains far

from the constructivist approach (theorized at the same era by Charles Wagley with the notion of "social race" and later developed by Michael Banton)<sup>12</sup> that is today mobilized by researchers in favor of the use of the word "race",<sup>13</sup> in the context of the debates that are currently raging in France.<sup>14</sup>

- 20 In the race/class debate, which is so lively today in militant and academic circles, Michel Leiris remained faithful to a Marxist interpretation: While he recognized the importance of race in the positioning of individuals, he always tried to reduce this racial position to a class membership. He properly analyzed how, in the West Indies, the social relations resulting from slavery were articulated with the prejudice of color, without these two orders of phenomena being completely superimposed; conscious that the two scales, social and racial, ended up not coinciding perfectly, even if the inferiority, statistically speaking, is always situated on the "black" side, the "race" becoming only a simple element of *presumption*, as he said it, of the social position... In accordance with this orientation, Michel Leiris considered that in the West Indies, both "whites" and "blacks" attributed too much importance to race, interpreting all situations through this prism. This did not prevent him from giving a detailed account of the racial logic that governs, or at least directs, social relations. He explains in particular how, despite the ambiguities, the phenotype holds the role of social marker. Combined with other criteria, color, as a bodily imprint, provides relatively precise information on the origin of individuals, particularly on the place to which their ancestors were assigned during slavery (the luminous passage he sites from A. de Tocqueville is particularly revealing in this respect).<sup>15</sup>
- 21 The thorny question of the autonomy of race in relation to class determinations arises in this respect, but Leiris did not really advance in its resolution. In comparison, we can evoke here the argumentation of Frantz Fanon, for whom, in the colonies, the classical perspectives of Marxist social analysis become blurred: the infrastructure becomes superstructure, and one can only observe an apparent "overdetermination by the racial order of the hierarchical classification that society imputes on itself"<sup>16</sup> and that it is thus a mental production, one which presides over the racial ordering, which calibrates the individuals and groups present. Thus, a new line of argument can be opened up, to which Leiris did not have access: race is not a disguised form of class, or at least has only corresponded with it in the brief moment of colonial formation. From the start, a process was set in motion which, "by divesting (racial relations) of their function as a relation of production, led to their prevalence" and the racial criterion was able to be objectified in real social groups. In other words, *the distinctive autonomy of racial relations in the social field develops*: "phenotypic characters acquire their own value".<sup>17</sup> These characters being biologically inscribed and heritable from generation to generation, the phenomenon takes on a temporal dimension in the long run... A *sign* in which a social meaning (corresponding to the respective places of the individuals linked to their phenotypes and to their ancestries) and a biological meaning, based on the range of distinctive phenotypes and on the heredity they express, race induces a very great *viscosity* of social relationships; by this, it can become an objective tool of stabilization of these relationships: the stigmas attached to racial characteristics make it possible to reproduce social inequalities, even where formal legislation abolishes them, which explains why the mark resulting from slavery could be maintained after the official abolition of the servile institution...<sup>18</sup>

- 22 As regards racism, Michel Leiris clearly posed the problem of the definitions of the latter, specified in a clear way, between a strict sense –that is to say an idea, and the acts which accompany it, inseparable from a process of domination or exclusion, as well as from the feeling of a superiority legitimizing this domination or exclusion: In the West Indies of his era, he did not see any trace of this racism, which one can qualify as "supremacist"- , and a broad sense that he saw being practiced, on the contrary, was in the heritage of a socio-racial order (even if all idea of superiority and all institutional translation have disappeared), whose mental reflection is the "prejudice" that he evokes at length, implying above all phenomena of social separation, but which can also be explained in terms of classes, as in non-racialized, but unequal societies. Racism that we would describe today as "structural", impregnating society without necessarily mobilizing the consciousness of the actors, a terrain favorable to the "racialization of conflicts", according to the racial positioning of individuals and whatever their motivations...
- 23 This opposition between "racism in the strict sense" and "racism in the broad sense" is reminiscent of the current academic and activist debates in France on the legitimate and relevant definitions of racism ("institutional", "systemic", "state" or as a doctrine and ideology) and of anti-racism ("moral", "political" or linked to "identity"). In the West Indies, as in France, besides racial discrimination sanctioned by law, how can we consider, name, and fight against the complex but tangible sociological mechanisms that reproduce domination, inequality, and racial prejudice? The racial laws of the Vichy regime and racial segregation in the United States seemed to have implicitly shaped Leiris' representations of "racism in the strict sense". The objectively lesser social and political impact of the "racism in the broad sense" which he observed in the West Indies explains the nuance that he seemed to want to establish.
- 24 The question of a possible "anti-white racism", so often raised today, is already addressed by Leiris, who occasionally encountered it in the talks of his "white" informants: this racism, if it can be so called, cannot be compared to the racism exercised by the racially dominant group, according to him, because it responds to class frustrations that are born of domination or of competition between social groups. There is indeed no underlying system of social, economic, political discriminations wherein it would be inscribed... The possible racism of the dominated ones would under these conditions belong only to what Albert Memmi later called (in 1982) a "toothless racism",<sup>19</sup> unable to be articulated to any domination. Leiris properly perceived, moreover, that the allegation of a racism attributed to an individual or a group, whatever its target, is primarily an *imputation*, namely a mental judgment by which one imagines the behavior or the thought of another person, without having access to the reality of this act or this thought. The information used to scrutinize this judgment is therefore discursive data, and the reality of what is designated in the imputation remains outside the analysis, unless one undertakes a process of verification, invalidating or confirming the imputative talk (a process he sometimes undertook himself, as when he examined the content of an article in the communist newspaper, *L'Étincelle*, which was accused of anti-white racism). The theme of this possible "anti-white racism" was revisited in light of its frequent allegation by metropolitans, in a game of cross-attributions with the colored population. The result was that the accusation of anti-white racism was based on a belief in the racism of those of the other "race". Though this was, as Leiris remarked, attaching a specific importance to the

criterion of race (implying an attitude that consists in wanting to interpret everything in terms of race, making it the alpha and omega of all social relations) and falling into the very trap that one intends to denounce... A reflection that is still relevant in contemporary France...

- 25 Focusing on the recent presence, at least in greater numbers, of metropolitans in the West Indies, he showed how, even though they are reputedly less touched with racial prejudice than white Creoles, they are no less integrated into the local racial game, assigned and/or self-assigning to the category of "white". As relations with the metropolis had become closer, and increased, he equally noted that many West Indians also travelled to the metropolis, where, confronted with a "white" majority, they also come up against an assignment, referred to their color, "overdetermined from the outside" (in this regard, we are reminded of the formula proposed just before the publication of Leiris' text by F. Fanon in his book *Peau noire, masques blancs*), even if, in this hexagonal France of the 1950s, color was not socially operative, within a population that has remained relatively homogeneous from the phenotypic point of view, which places in the forefront the social variable in the positioning of individuals on the scale of wealth, power and prestige. Leiris' ethnography, however, surreptitiously touched on the prehistory of a racial and colorist question in the "metropole" when he analyzed the prejudices of metropolitans in the West Indies. The belief in the savagery and primitiveness of "black" people was then shared by many "white" French people on European territory.<sup>20</sup>
- 26 Sixty-six years later, however, the situation has clearly changed, due to the presence on French territory of certain descendants of poor immigrant workers from the former French colonies in Africa. Their physical type, correlated with their surname, is indeed often considered as a marker of racial and cultural otherness, as well as of a subaltern social status. Rightly or wrongly, this marker is associated, on the one hand, with the country or culture of origin of the ascendants, and, on the other hand, with the marginalized urban subcultures of the underprivileged neighborhoods, where this fringe of the French population is overrepresented. Social ascension is not entirely enough to erase prejudice. This demographic evolution has led to the emergence of a racial question in France that is linked to class considerations, without being entirely confused with them. Leiris' meticulous analysis of these complex mechanisms, already at work in the West Indies more than half a century earlier and in different ways, suggested relevant avenues for comparison.
- 27 Michel Leiris finally talked on the future, expressing some remarkable premonitions: the installation, among some young people, of the question of national independence (which indeed gained momentum at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s and 1980s); interest in the Creole language, which undeniably grew in the local public debate from the 1970s onwards and has not waned since then, in conjunction with the assertion of a local cultural pride. What Leiris revealed was part of a longer history of the politicization of a cultural, but also racial, "black" consciousness in the West Indies,<sup>21</sup> while announcing the growing influence of independence movements.<sup>22</sup>
- 28 In 2009, the general strikes that paralyzed Guadeloupe and Martinique updated the anti-colonialist and anti-capitalist critique, taking into consideration the tertiarization of West Indian economies, which are entirely based on the consumption of products imported from Europe.<sup>23</sup> The question of cultural specificity remains central and continues to be linked, in some circles, to a racial consciousness that is now more

radically politicized. The adoption of a way of life and adherence to values and a paradigm of thought shaped by Western modernity are perceived by a certain fringe of opinion as the acceptance of a domination that indefinitely prolongs the effects of colonialism. Within some literate "black" as well as "Indian" circles, even when social ascension was taking, or perhaps precisely when it had occurred, a desire to challenge at all costs the idea of racial and cultural inferiority was reinforced through attempts to reconnect with an essence untouched by French or European contributions, with reference to pre-colonial African or Indian cultures or civilizations. As part of a more general trend, this quest of which Glissant called "root identity" was one of the notable developments since the publication of Leiris' book.

- 29 A final lesson can be drawn from the reading of Michel Leiris' writeup, whose anti-racist and anti-colonialist commitment was well known, when one refers to the last sentence of his text: in the face of the social dilemmas of the world, today as much as yesterday, it is advisable for the "ethnographer" not to step out of the role of "dispassionate observer" that is expected of him, far from the invective and manifestations of intolerance which trouble the contemporary debate on the question of race.

---

## NOTES

1. We would like to thank Jean Jamin, Michel Leiris' testamentary executor, for allowing us to reproduce these excerpts *in extenso*.
2. Chloé Maurel, "La question des races. Le programme de l'UNESCO", *Gradhiva* 5, 2007, 114-131, <http://journals.openedition.org/gradhiva/815>.
3. On these visits, see Jean Jamin, "Rendez-vous manqué avec le vaudou," *Gradhiva* 1, 2005, 225-231, <https://doi.org/10.4000/gradhiva.375>.
4. Saint-Claude, a locality upward of Basse-Terre, and the road to Didier, upward of Fort-de-France, are the privileged places where the white sectors of Guadeloupean and Martinican society are established. Despite the marked differences between the white Creoles of Martinique (long more represented in French academic and popular culture) and those of Guadeloupe, it is their commonalities that are most often remembered today, so that their situation tends to be amalgamated. This association can also be explained by the settlement of white Martinican Creole families in Guadeloupe from the middle of the twentieth century. As a result, from the 1980s onwards, in Guadeloupe, the term "Blanc pays" gradually fell into disuse in favor of "Béké" (note by JLB and AG).
5. Leiris is unaware that in French West Indian Creole, "neg" and "nègre" are, even today, the only equivalents of "black man"/"black woman". In West Indian French, "nègre" and "négresse" are sometimes used in the same sense, without any pejorative connotation. In Haitian Creole, "neg" loses all racial meaning to designate the human race, the community, or any male individual. "Blan" in contrast means "foreigner", without distinction of color (note by JLB and AG).
6. Most of these categories, essentially genealogical, have now fallen into disuse, especially in Guadeloupe. Only the phenotypical terms "chabin" and "chabine" are commonly being used (note the excellent description given by Leiris) with qualifiers to qualify the appreciation of the



color (such as "golden chabine"), while details are given on the texture and length of the hair (note by JLB and AG).

7. These analyses echo the stereotypes that literate Guadeloupeans "of color" still have about white Creoles and vice versa. The former tending to negatively judge what they perceive as a lack of culture and limited interests (business and leisure activities related mainly to the sea and boats) of the latter. At the same time, some white Creole entrepreneurs reproach the educated "colored" milieu for preferring "intellectual" vocations (judged all the more useless because they think they go hand in hand with anti-colonialist convictions), to entrepreneurship, which creates wealth (note by JLB and AG).

8. Underlined by JLB and AG.

9. Emphasis by JLB and AG.

10. Underlined by JLB and AG (similar comment as previous).

11. Henri Neuville, *L'espèce, la race et le métissage en anthropologie: Introduction à l'étude de l'anthropologie générale*, Paris: Masson et Cie, 1933; "Peuples ou races", *Encyclopédie française*, Paris: Larousse, 1936.

12. Charles Wagley, *Races et classes dans le Brésil rural*, Paris, Unesco, 1952 and Michael Banton, *Race Relations*, Tavistock, 1967 (French translation: *Sociologie des relations raciales*, Paris: Payot, 1971).

13. Sarah Mazouz, *Race*, Paris, Anamosa, 2020.

14. For a brief analysis of the evolution of the definition of race in anthropology, see the introduction by Wade, Peter, *Race And Ethnicity In Latin America*. London: Pluto Press, 1997, 6-14.

15. Jean-Luc Bonniol, "(T)Race. La couleur de la peau. Inscription corporelle d'une origine servile", *Ethnologie française*, 2020/2, 178: 299-312.

16. Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952.

17. Jean-Luc Jamard, "Réflexions sur la racialisation des rapports sociaux en Martinique: de l'esclavage biracial à l'anthroponymie des races sociales", *Archipelago*, 1983, 3- 4: 47-81.

18. Jean-Luc Bonniol, *La couleur comme maléfice. Une illustration créole de la généalogie des "Blancs" et des "Noirs"*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1992.

19. Albert Memmi, *Le racisme. Définition, description, traitement*, Paris: Gallimard, 1982.

20. The prejudice of color having slowly spread, from its colonial home, in people's minds, this racialized imagination was reinforced from the time of the second colonization, relayed by school textbooks and colonial exhibitions as well as by advertising, but also, in another sense, by the craze for jazz and the "black arts" from the interwar period. See in this regard Raymond Bachollet, *Négripub: l'image des Noirs dans la publicité*, Paris, Somogy, 1992 and Berliner, "Dancing dangerously: colonizing the exotic Bal Negre in the inter-war years", *French Cultural Studies* 12, 1, 2001.

21. Jean-Pierre Sainton, *Les nègres en politique: couleur, identités et stratégies de pouvoir en Guadeloupe au tournant du siècle*, Villeneuve-D'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2000.

22. Alain-Philippe Blerald, *La question nationale en Guadeloupe et en Martinique*, Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1988.

23. See Jean-Luc Bonniol, "Janvier-mars 2009, trois mois de lutte en Guadeloupe," *Les Temps Modernes*, 662-663, 1, 2011; Ary Gordien, "Guadeloupe, l'après LKP: Anticolonialisme, identité et vie quotidienne," *Revue Asylon(s)* 11 (2013); Yarimar Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of the Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); and Pierre Odin, *Pwofitasyon: luttés syndicales et anticolonialisme en Guadeloupe et en Martinique*, Paris: la Découverte, 2019.