A "New Kourou": Projects to Settle the Maroons of Suriname in French Guiana

Barbara Traver, Portland State University & Washington State University
Vancouver

For nearly a century after France won sole control over Guiana in 1676, while the "sugar boom" transformed the Caribbean islands, the South American colony found no reliable cash crop and remained poor, stagnant, and neglected. It constituted an anomaly in the French Atlantic world, neither a settler colony, like Canada, nor a true plantation colony, like the wealthy Antillean islands. However, after the loss of Canada and Louisiana in the Seven Years War, French Guiana suddenly loomed large in ministerial calculations. The Duc de Choiseul, Minister of the Navy (1761-1766) saw the colony as key in his plans both to guard the remains of French empire and to have revenge against Britain. Choiseul resolved to transform Guiana into a dense, white agricultural settlement like Britain's North American colonies. A large population of white farmers would provide troops, food, and supplies to safeguard the French Caribbean islands and would allow France to threaten British interests in the area. The final design for the “New Colony” also reflected physiocratic ideas such as the primacy of proprietors over farmers, free trade, and the importance of free labor, as well as Enlightenment preoccupations with virtue, religious toleration, restrictions on capital punishment, opposition to arbitrary government, and belief in natural law.1

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Haste and poor planning doomed the project. The French government’s promises to potential colonists, mostly “Germans” from Alsace and the Rhineland, were extravagant and the response was overwhelming. The French ports to which recruits were directed were quickly inundated and thousands were hurriedly shipped to Kourou in Guiana before there were enough facilities to receive them or supplies and food to help them. Most arrived during the rainy season when work was impossible and the only shelter available consisted of tents and rude huts into which many people had to be crammed. Supplies rotted because there was no proper place to store them and diseases swept through the crowded camps. Their dreams of a bright future shattered and drowned in the mud, many colonists succumbed to despair. The death toll was horrific. In all, between 13,000 and 14,000 colonists had arrived in Guiana. Roughly 9,000 of them had died. In addition, the “New Colony” had consumed roughly 30 million livres.

This disaster could have deterred any government from further colonization efforts. However, in the years between 1763 and 1789, plans for the development and peopling of the colony continued. Guiana’s future remained unresolved, swinging between two possible models in the French Atlantic world: settler colony or plantation colony. Despite the hecatomb, visions of Guiana as a settler colony, a peasant-based, agricultural society, providing soldiers and supplies for the critical plantation colonies of the Antilles and a defensive bulwark against Britain, did not disappear. At the same time, many in the metropole and most whites in Guiana itself argued for expansion of the colony’s small plantation sector and the development of a colony along Antillean lines. In this undetermined situation, a succession of ministries approved a wide variety of projects: settlement of soldier-farmers, immigration of slaveholding free people of color from Gorée, establishment of monopolistic chartered companies. Guiana’s unresolved position created space for experimentation with thoughts and projects based upon ideas that differed from the emerging “scientific racism.”

Over the past half-century, many historians have focused on the origins and development of modern racist thought and policy both in France and in the French colonial world. In one of the earliest studies, Yvan Debbasch,
examining the growth of rigid, racial segregation in the Caribbean colonies between 1765 and 1770, argued that the belief that skin color represented an “indelible” stain served to justify both slavery and racial separation.4 William B. Cohen demonstrated how received and initial negative images of Africans were transformed through the effects of the slave system and Enlightenment natural history into the conviction by the end of the eighteenth century that “culture and character were formed by race” and that blacks were “particularly depraved.”5 In “There are no Slaves in France: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime, Sue Peabody has shown that France’s “Freedom Principle” and growing commitment to liberty meant that the exclusion of blacks from the metropole, a ban considered necessary to maintaining the “purity of French blood,” came to be justified in racial, rather than servile, terms.6 Pierre Boulle, in his study of blacks and people of color in Ancien Régime France, also traces the “construction” of “scientific racism” – the idea that “races” are “real entities, established by nature and whose characteristics are indelible” – among the French elite from the “bricks” of European expansion, Enlightenment natural science, and the belief in European superiority.7 Most recently, Andrew S. Curran has examined the efforts of European scientists and men of letters to account for African difference from the (white) normal or universal and how during the eighteenth century, the African went “from a barbaric heathen (a moral and religious category) […] to a subhuman (racial category) for whom bondage seemed the logical but regrettable extension of the race’s many shortcomings.”8 These historians agree that by the late eighteenth century, the belief that skin color signified and determined deeper physical, mental, and moral capacities had gained a dominant position in French thought and that hierarchical beliefs about “race” were becoming increasingly fixed.

Other historians have noted that in the French colonies from 1763 on, strict segregation was imposed and the rights of free people of color restricted in the name of biological differences. In addition to Yvan Debbasch’s work, already mentioned, John Garrigus has described the process by which free men of color, despite their military service, were denied citizenship using both biological and moral terms, as whites forged a new colonial identity through the rigid exclusion

of people of color from the public sphere.\(^9\) These colonial ideas of black incapacity and depravity played a significant role in the emergence of biological racism in the metropole. For example, Boulle argues that governmental concern over “race mixing” in France arose partly because many Antillean planters had assumed key positions in the government.\(^{10}\) Jean Tarrade has noted that French administrators who had served in the colonies “came to share the colonists’ mentalities.”\(^{11}\)

However, though increasingly dominant, scientific racism was not the only strain of thought emerging at the time. Historians have long since ceased to see the “Enlightenment” as a unitary, internally consistent and coherent system of thought. Curran has described the image of the African during the eighteenth century as “more a shifting mosaic than a fixed portrait.”\(^{12}\) Biological racism was contested from several perspectives. One was pragmatic and concerned with the maintenance of the plantation economy. Debbasch has noted a “softened (modéré) segregationism” especially among French military leaders who understood how essential free people of color were to the policing of the plantation system.\(^{13}\) Similarly, men moved by the brutality of slavery and concerned to protect the lucrative colonial system against slave insurrection urged better treatment of the enslaved. Other lines of thought challenged the “indelibility” of blackness. While accepting the idea that blackness both indicated and determined intellectual and moral weakness, these thinkers believed that the condition could be changed over time. Cornelius de Pauw, for example, asserted that blackness and its deficiencies could be “purged […] through prolonged race mixing.”\(^{14}\)

However, the strain of thought that posed the greatest challenge both to slavery and to emerging scientific racism was the one that rejected the Enlightenment’s discoveries of African physiological “difference” and stressed instead Enlightenment universalism, the “essential sameness” of men.\(^{15}\) While still accepting blacks’ mental and moral deficiencies, these thinkers blamed them on blacks’ circumstances – enslavement – rather than on their physiology. These


\(^{10}\) Boulle, 76.


\(^{12}\) Curran, 6.

\(^{13}\) Debbasch, 111-117.

\(^{14}\) Curran, 127.

\(^{15}\) See Curran’s discussion of the emergence of antislavery ideas and rhetoric. Curran, 194-204.
differing ideas, too, made their way into government and ministerial circles. Michèle Duchet has demonstrated the "osmosis" that existed between the team that wrote the Histoire des deux Indes (in multiple editions 1770, 1774, 1780) and the offices of the colonial administration. Diderot appears to have been close enough to the ministry to have had access to the Correspondance des Colonies. Tarrade has pointed out that from the mid-1770s on, the ideas of the philosophes and the new "sensibility deriving from Jean-Jacques Rousseau" led the Ministry of the Navy to investigate possible reforms. Unfortunately, most proposed reforms foundered on the rock of colonial "intransigence."

French Guiana, however, was not Saint-Domingue. In contrast to the "pearl of the Antilles," the colony presented an opening for the implementation of different ideas. First, since its plantation sector was underdeveloped, Guiana did not have a large, wealthy and influential white population or many absentee landowners who could apply pressure on Versailles. Second, the ministry during this period continued to hope that Guiana could play a crucial role in colonial defense and never gave up the goal of establishing there a settler colony capable of defending and supplying the French Caribbean islands. Finally, because of Guiana's relative insignificance, failure of a project in the colony carried fewer risks (as long as the ministry avoided costly, large-scale enterprises like Kourou). Guiana became in Tarrade's words, "the privileged terrain of every reform attempt and every utopia since 1763."

French Guiana is perhaps best known for experiments in emancipation there in the late 1780s. The Marquis de Lafayette bought two estates in the colony, La Gabrielle and Saint-Regis, with the aim of instituting humane treatment and gradual emancipation. In addition, two administrators who served in Guiana, Ferdinand-Alexandre, baron de Bessner and Daniel Lescallier, wrote plans for the elimination of slavery.

Less well known is that several projects proposed earlier, from the late 1760s through the early 1780s, while not directly attacking slavery, struck at the

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18 Tarrade, 102-103, 105.
19 Tarrade, 109.
very roots of scientific racism by challenging the emerging ideas of “blackness,”
and of “whiteness.” Promoters of these projects, in particular the baron de
Bessner, drew on the strain of universalism in Enlightenment thought. Bessner’s
proposal to create a settler colony, reminiscent of Kourou but this time populated
by maroons from Suriname, rested on the premise that the deficiencies of blacks’
character – laziness, dishonesty, treachery, viciousness – were not innate, but the
product of enslavement. This being so, radically different external influences –
freedom, kindness, the ability to acquire goods – would transform the maroons
into a mass of hard-working, happy, and productive small farmers. The dream of
Kourou could at last be achieved. Ministerial approval, at least tentative approval,
of this project demonstrates that French officials’ racial thinking was more
complex and flexible than it appears from the study of the Antilles alone. Efforts
to develop French Guiana provide a distinctive perspective on officials wrestling
with problems of empire and ideas of race.

In the early 1770s, Ferdinand-Alexandre, baron de Bessner, a former
recruiter for Kourou and author of two previous (failed) plans for white
settlement, unleashed a veritable barrage of mémoires on the ministry painting a
vision of how to turn small and impoverished Guiana into a thriving colony.22
The subjects ranged widely: tax rates, land sales, the introduction of enslaved
workers, forests and wood, increasing the number of horned animals, creating a
population of “civilized” Amerindians, a plan for the gradual elimination of
slavery. Amidst the flood of paper was an astonishing proposal to invite the
maroons of Suriname to settle in the colony.23

At first glance, this plan is astounding. Bessner advocated actually inviting
and attracting to Guiana people whose fierce fight for independence had defeated
Dutch efforts and whose rebellion represented the nightmare of a slave society.
What was the purpose behind such a plan? Bessner’s personal goals seem to have
been twofold: to become governor of Guiana and to procure support for a new
company to invest in Guiana. In both of these, he was eventually successful
though he never made the fortune, which was his ultimate aim.24 In addition,

22 Both of Bessner’s earlier projects had challenged core concepts of “whiteness” by
striving to prove that whites could perform heavy agricultural labor in the tropics. See
23 Bruletout de Prefontaine, whose ideas had inspired Choiseul’s plan for Kourou, had
made a similar suggestion in 1762, but there is no record of official reaction to it and the
idea disappeared as the plans for Kourou took shape. Prefontaine stressed utility in his
proposal, not security. “Copie d’une réponse faite à M. Accaron à Paris le 7 8ème
1762, au sujet des nègres marons de Surinam et de la nouvelle colonie,” C14/25/318, CAOM.
24 Bessner was appointed governor of Guiana in 1781 and the Compagnie de la Guyane
was formed with a capital of 3,000,000 livres. See Pierre-Victor Malouet, Collection de
mémoires et correspondances officielles sur l’administration des colonies, et notamment
Bessner was a peripheral figure of the Enlightenment. He was connected to the Jussieu circle and to other *philosophes*, and his plan for the gradual elimination of slavery was included by the Abbé Raynal in the *Histoire des deux Indes*. A successful and prosperous colony of free blacks would provide powerful ammunition to the antislavery cause, undermining the argument that blacks would not work unless forced to do so and providing an optimistic vision of what a post-slavery world might look like.

Bessner, however, had to convince, not the philosophical circles, but the Minister of the Navy, Antoine de Sartine (1774-1780), of the soundness of his plan. In this effort, he deployed three lines of argument: defense of the colony, development of the colony, and Enlightenment universalism, the belief in the fundamental similarity of humans. Defense and development had, of course, been the dominant concerns in the planning for Kourou, and Bessner’s use of them indicated that dreams of a settler colony in Guiana had not died. First, Bessner presented strategic and defensive reasons in support of his plan, raising the perennial concern that the colony would be lost. The maroons, he argued, finding themselves in a continuing “state of poverty and violence,” were bound “sooner or later” to break out of their confined areas and attack whites, the French as well as the Dutch. The only way for the French to avoid being confused with the Dutch was to “demonstrate benevolence” and to hint that those maroons who wished to settle on French territory would receive help as long as they agreed to obey the law. Once established in Guiana, the Suriname maroons would then provide a strong defense against both external threat from the Dutch or the British and against future *marronage* in the colony.

Equally importantly, Bessner argued, the plan would “procure a population of robust people” for the colony, 30,000 people who would contribute to Guiana’s progress through “their labor and their industry.” After Kourou, one of the strongest arguments against creating settlements of small farmers had been the conventional belief that only the “strong arms of blacks” could perform the heavy labor required in tropical agriculture. By inviting the maroons of Suriname to become colonists, Bessner neatly sidestepped this argument. These “free blacks” would bring with them the hardiness and strength needed for farming in the tropics. The vision of Kourou would be fulfilled, but this time,

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26 The original proposal has not survived, but it is summarized in some “Notes to the Minister” (1777), F3/22/460, CAOM and in “Précis sur la nation des Nègres libres” (1774), DFC/XII/Mémoires/62/219, CAOM.

27 “Notes to the Minister,” F3/22/460, CAOM. Presumably, the maroons would be required to return other people fleeing slavery.

28 “Notes to the Minister,” F3/22/460, CAOM, Aix-en-Provence.
with a hard-working, free black population that would not succumb to disease or despair.

Finally, Bessner relied on Enlightenment universalism and belief in environmentalism to explain how the maroons could transform from formidable opponents to peaceful farmers. Environmentalism was a response to a central question confronting Enlightenment thinkers: how to explain, given their belief in fundamental unity and similarity among humans, the wide varieties of human culture and appearance. Since for these men, their own culture and appearance was normative, “blackness indicated an anomaly […] that needed explanation.”

Environmentalism attributed differences in appearance, customs and character to external influences, which could of course be altered. Thus, “character” was not fixed, but malleable. Bessner vehemently argued against the growing “scientific” consensus that “blackness” meant mental deficiency and moral depravity, that skin color signified incapacity for improvement:

> It is a mistake to believe that the espèce nègre (black race) is an accursed espèce (race) from which we cannot hope for any good. Those who think this way are confusing natural dispositions (tendencies) with the effects of slavery… The black in the colonies is atrocious only because he is the victim of his master’s atrocity: he is treacherous and cowardly only because he is the most weak. He is lazy only because he is overburdened with work for the profit of a master who mistreats him and often does not [even] feed him.

If the blacks were “savage, treacherous, unfaithful to treaties, terrible and irreconcilable enemies,” that was only what slavery had made of them.

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30 Bessner’s defense of the maroons has often been quoted as an important statement of antislavery opinion. The section first appeared in 1774 in his “Mémoire sommaire sur la colonie de Cayenne et la Guyane française,” quoted in Duchet, 156. Also found in “Rapport summis au ministre au sujet des nègres marrons de Surinam,” C¹⁴/57/185 and F³/22/464, CAOM.

31 “C’est une erreur de croire que l’espèce nègre est une espèce maudite dont on ne doit espérer aucun bien. Ceux qui pensent ainsi confondent les dispositions naturels avec les effets de l’esclavage […] Le nègre n’est atroce dans les colonies, que parce qu’il est la victime de l’atrocité de son maître ; il n’est traître & lâche, que parce qu’il est le plus faible. Il n’est paressieux que parce qu’il est excédé de travail au profit d’un maître qui le maltraite & qui souvent ne le nourrit pas.” “Rapport summis au ministre au sujet des nègres marrons du Surinam,” C¹⁴/57/185 and F³/22/464, CAOM. The spelling of this and subsequent French quotations has been modernized.

32 “féroces, perfides, infidèles aux traités, ennemis atroces et irréconciliables.” “Rapport summis au ministre au sujet des nègres marrons du Surinam,” C¹⁴/57/184 and F³/22/464, CAOM.
Blacks, like whites, Bessner argued, were capable of civilization and would respond to good treatment and self-interest. "It is not to be feared that they will revolt against a government from which they know only kindness and to which it will be important to them to remain faithful both for their security and their well being." Bessner's stated belief in universalism and environmentalism was not surprising. What is much more interesting is that his plan found favor in Versailles. The scheme denied racial assumptions shared by many in the metropole. Bessner was asserting that blacks were not "naturally" indolent and that they could become industrious colonists. Moreover, his plan assumed that these maroons, whose fierce and victorious struggles with the Dutch had become nightmare symbols of bloody catastrophe, were not fearsome, and that they would actually improve Guiana's security.

Of course, Bessner's emphasis on security was calculated to prove persuasive to a ministry always fearful that France might lose its last continental colony in the Americas. Another reason for official support of the proposal probably lay in Bessner's personality, charm, powers of persuasion, connections, and tenacity. However, his project also appealed to the same ideas that underlay the growing support for amelioration during the same period. Both relied on the belief that good treatment would bring people's behavior into conformity with the desires of the government. Official interest in his proposal reflected at least some acceptance of these ideas. Despite the vociferous opposition from those who held emerging racialist views, the ministry leaned toward accepting the plan. In rejecting a request from Governor Fiedmond to buy enslaved men to free for service in the Chasseurs, the ministry assured him that soon the settlement of the maroons would make such a step unnecessary. They also sent Pierre Victor Malouet to Guiana to investigate the feasibility of the plan. Malouet was to become a leading opponent of the scheme.

Up to this point, the plan and the controversy it engendered had remained a theoretical debate conducted in Europe through memoirs and letters. There is no indication that the maroons themselves were ever aware of the scheme. The ministry had still made no firm decision when the issue suddenly became very urgent and concrete. In June 1776, the Boni maroons crossed the Maroni River from Suriname to French Guiana. Unlike the maroon groups that Bessner had

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33 "[I]l n'est pas à craindre enfin qu'ils se révoltent contre un gouvernement qu'ils ne connaîtront que par les bienfaits, et auquel il leur importerà de rester fidèle pour leur sûreté comme pour leur bien-être." “Rapport summis au ministre au sujet des nègres marrons du Surinam,” C14/57/185 and F122/464, CAOM.

34 “À Mère de Fiedmond et Malouet” (September 3, 1776), B156/488, CAOM.

35 A valuable first-hand account of the Boni Maroon Wars in Suriname is John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam: translated for the first time from the original 1790 manuscript*, ed. by Richard Price and Sally Price (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). More recent historians
proposed attracting, the Boni had not signed a treaty with the Dutch recognizing their freedom and independence. Since the Dutch and the French had made an agreement providing for the mutual restitution of maroons, accepting the presence of the Boni violated the treaty. In addition, without official recognition of their liberty, the Boni were still legally the property of their Dutch slaveholders, so French refusal to try to return them could be seen as an attack on private property. Though initially, the French did make some preparations to chase the Boni, the governor, Fiedmond, was extremely reluctant to become involved in a guerrilla war that the French could not win. After Malouet’s arrival, the administrators decided to simply leave the Boni alone while assuring them of French benevolence toward them. In fact, this policy, pursued for several decades, proved very successful. The Boni never attacked plantations in French Guiana.

French failure to attack the Boni or to allow Dutch troops to cross the Maroni sparked a small diplomatic crisis with the Netherlands. Interestingly, Minister of the Navy Sartine, who in other areas used racial categories as criteria for exclusion or the denial of rights, actually employed Bessner’s universalist argument and language in a note to Vergennes as the latter prepared the official French reply to Dutch protests. Faithfully echoing Bessner, Sartine asserted that kindness and good treatment would mold and transform Boni behavior and character.36

French entry into the War for American Independence delayed the official decision on whether or not to implement Bessner’s plan either with the maroons still in Suriname or with the Boni. In 1781, the new Minister of the Navy, the marquis de Castries (1780-1787), reopened the question. The “Notes to the Minister” at this time advised leaving the Boni alone where they were.37 Bessner’s dream of a maroon settlement appeared doomed.

The Boni, however, were not simply objects in French debates. They were also subjects and actors, skillfully strengthening their own position, seeking to make use of the French, influencing French action. Boni moves would stimulate French reaction and reignite controversy. By 1781, the Boni were making peace with their neighbors, both Amerindian and maroon. As part of this process, they asked the Amerindians to convey their wish for peace to the French. This Boni overture gave Bessner ammunition with which to push again for the


36 “Lettre du Ministre à M. le C`te de Vergennes” (September 20, 1777), F3/22/469, Collection Moreau de St-Méry, CAOM. For Sartine’s role in the Police des Noirs see Peabody, 111-120. For Sartine’s views on the need to maintain an impenetrable barrier between whites and people of color in the case of the Goréans in Guiana, see Traver, 224.

37 “Nouveau rapport sur une lettre de Fiedmond,” C14/57/187, CAOM.
implementation of his cherished plan. That same year, Bessner was appointed governor of Guiana, though his project still did not receive official approval. He was instructed only to reassure the Boni and try to ascertain how many of them there were since the ministry was concerned to know if they were numerous enough to constitute a threat to the colony.\(^{38}\)

Once in Cayenne, however, Bessner sent representatives to visit the Boni. The first emissary was a Sieur Cadet. Accounts of his visit vary widely, with Bessner gleaning from it evidence of Boni industriousness and desire for peace and his opponents finding proof only of Boni ferocity, barbarity, and depravity.\(^{39}\) However, it is clear that the Boni felt that they had confirmed a “treaty” with Cadet and confidently expected the “presents” that they had demanded from the French. The second visitor was a priest, the Abbé Jacquemin, to whom the Boni expressed frustration that “presents” had not been forthcoming.\(^{40}\) Reaction to these visits was fury in Versailles and disquiet and fear in Cayenne. Bessner managed to assuage the ministry and to convince them that he had not exceeded his instructions. However, though Bessner continued to lobby for his plan, no positive steps were taken to implement it.

When the baron died on 13 July 1783, the project did not die with him. Shortly before Bessner’s death, Daniel Lescallier had been named ordonnateur.\(^{41}\) An “enlightened” administrator, Lescallier shared Bessner’s belief in universalism and environmentalism and his dislike of slavery.\(^{42}\) Lescallier’s plan for the Boni resembled Bessner’s with familiar stress placed on security (controlling the maroons) and utility (their potential as farmers, craftsmen and soldiers).\(^{43}\) Another proponent of turning the Boni into colonists was the Swiss engineer who had been brought by Malouet from Suriname to expand sugar production in Guiana: Jean-Samuel Guisan. Though he shared late-eighteenth century views of the racial inferiority of Africans, Guisan held out hope that the Boni could be

\(^{38}\) “Le ministre à Bessner et Prévill,” (October 21, 1783), C\(^{14}/57/205\), CAOM.

\(^{39}\) For Bessner’s account of Cadet’s visit, see “Projets de rapport sur les nègres marrons de Surinam,” C\(^{14}/57/195-196\), CAOM, Aix-en-Provence. A hostile account can be found in “Mémoire de Mallevalet au ministre,” C\(^{14}/56/133-140\), CAOM.

\(^{40}\) Abbé Jacquemin, “Journal de mon voyage chez les Indiens et les nègres réfugiés sur nos terres, fait en Xbre 1782,” C\(^{14}/54/152-163\), CAOM.

\(^{41}\) The ordonnateur was the highest civilian authority in Guiana, overseeing administration, finances, and the council. Only the governor, who was the chief military authority, outranked him.

\(^{42}\) See Tarrade, 107-108 for a discussion of Lescallier and his views on slavery.

\(^{43}\) Fitz-Maurice et Lescallier, “Mémoire sur l’état actuel de la colonie de Cayenne et Guiane française au 1er janvier 1786, dressé en conformité de la lettre du ministre du 3 juin 1785 qui ordonne la remise d’un pareil mémoire à chaque mutation d’administrateurs,” C\(^{14}/60/60\), CAOM.
“civilized.”^44 Partly, he argued, this could be accomplished through external factors: religion, work, discipline, and desire for material goods.

However, Guisan was not a thoroughgoing environmentalist and the key component in his plan was a form of racial engineering. Recently, Max Nelson has brought attention to the presence of racial engineering in Enlightenment thought.^45 Influenced by works on animal breeding, Gabriel de Bory proposed multiplying and improving “mulatto” soldiers while Hilliard d’Auberteuil recommended producing a distinct, uniformly colored class of free people of color. Guisan’s suggestion differed somewhat from these men’s proposals but all three conceived of racial engineering as a means of social control: Bory through policing, d’Auberteuil by sharply defining social categories, and Guisan by “softening” the character of potential troublemakers.

Guisan shared the view of de Pauw and others that the liabilities of “blackness” could be purged along with the color. If physical appearance indicated and determined character, then character could be transformed by altering physical features. “Racial” mixing would change the “moral qualities” of this people so that they would never be able to return to their “former mœurs (customs).” To accomplish this blending, a few white men “of a mild and submissive nature,” would be encouraged to settle among the maroons, “so that a new population, which will be [composed] all of sang-mêlés (people of mixed race), will be the result.”^46 Guisan seems to have been influenced by Louis-Jean-Marie Daubenton’s assertion that “characteristics of the male animals reproduced more strongly” and he advocated marriage (or at least long-term sexual relationships) only between white men and African or black creole women. He did not propose that white women marry African or black creole men. There is no indication of ministry reaction to this plan.

In 1785, the Boni took two actions that reignited plans to move them farther into French Guiana. First, some young Boni men launched raids on Dutch plantations near the Maroni river, a move that threatened to embroil the French with the Dutch. Second, the Boni asked “to be admitted as free people under the

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^44 Jean-Samuel Guisan, “Mémoire sur les nègres marrons hollandais qui sont établis sur les terres de la Guyane française au bord du Maroni,” C14/60/227-243, CAOM.


^46 “Le grand but dans cette association de blancs et de noirs est de les habituer ensembles totalement, pour qu’il en résulte une nouvelle population qui sera toute de sang mêlés dans la suite.” Guisan, C14/60/240, CAOM.

^47 Louis-Jean-Marie Daubenton, a collaborator of Buffon, experimented with cross-breeding very different varieties of sheep and publicized his findings in lectures and a book. See Nelson, 18. Curran discusses de Pauw’s argument that African sperm was “tainted” and “ultimately responsible for the […] liabilities of the particular ‘variety.’” Curran, 127-128.
rule of His Majesty” and for “permission to devote themselves to industry and farming.”48 The second action was almost certainly the direct result of the first as the Boni had reason to fear Dutch retaliation and might have hoped for French protection.

Ministry reaction to the Boni request was mixed. On 20 April 1786, it authorized Governor Fitz-Maurice and Lescallier to recognize the Boni as free and to establish them in the colony. However, at the same time, the ministry commanded the administrators in Guiana to suspend “this établissement (settlement) until they received new orders” if the number of Boni proved to be small.49 The two administrators chose to act on the basis of the ministry’s tentative approval and the Boni overture. They convened a special council and invited three or four of the “principle chiefs” of the Boni to Cayenne to hear the French proposals. The delegation of six Boni men included two of the chief leaders.50

The French proposals reflected the twin desires of enticing the Boni to settle down as farmers and of exercising control over them. The French would admit the maroons as “subjects of the king” and the Boni could settle on territory by the river Mana where a fort would be constructed to protect them. They would be given land to cultivate and they could trade livestock, food, and commodities. For six years, they would be exempt from taxes and corvées (required unpaid labor) and after that time, they would have to pay the capitation (head tax). As they had done previously for some white settlers, the French undertook to provide the Boni “facilités (buildings)” and to lend them tools, food, etc.51

However, the Boni would be placed under the authority of a French military leader, the commandant du quartier. They would promise not to give refuge to any deserter whether white, black, or of color and would agree not to communicate with the Dutch or with the maroons in Suriname. Finally, the Boni leaders would promise to bring every person in their group over the age of twelve to take an oath of loyalty and to register the birth of their children.52

49 “Extrait d’une lettre de M. de Fitz-Maurice du 28 janvier dernier” (June 1, 1786), C14/60/150, CAOM.
50 “Note soumise au ministre sur des lettres de Fitz-Maurice et Lescallier des 1er et 12 décembre 1786,” C14/61/109, CAOM.
51 “Note soumise au ministre sur des lettres de Fitz-Maurice et Lescallier des 1er et 12 décembre 1786,” C14/61/110-111, CAOM.
One of the Boni leaders, Askan, declared that he found the proposals “in general, fair and reasonable.”\textsuperscript{53} It is unclear if he was being truthful or not. The conditions, if accepted, would have severely curtailed Boni independence and liberty. While many articles of the proposed treaty were similar to those in the treaties that the Suriname maroons had made with the Dutch, the requirement that the Boni leave their current villages and move to a site chosen by the French was not. If they moved, the Boni would be penned in, tied down, and cut off from potential allies. The Boni wanted independence from colonial society, not to return to it.\textsuperscript{54}

Askan and the other Boni leaders expressed themselves willing to comply with the articles, but using the excuse that they would have to obtain the approval of the other leaders, they left Cayenne without making a firm commitment.\textsuperscript{55} Unfortunately, we know nothing of the Boni discussions that followed this meeting, who (if anyone) might have supported accepting the French proposals, who counseled rejecting them, what arguments were made on each side, or how the final decision was reached.

The Boni rebuffed the French and rejected their offer. The chiefs sent no official word to the French administrators, but a young man who had accompanied them, returned with the news of their refusal. The Boni declared that they did not want to move to the Mana. Instead, they demonstrated a fierce determination to maintain their independence and to impose conditions on the French. They demanded that a post be established on the Maroni with only six soldiers at most. Instead of moving towards the coast, they announced that they were moving farther inland. Finally, they refused to accept the part the French wished to assign them. In a twist of French racist stereotyping, they declared that “noirs comme [us] ne sont pas faits pour avoir des concessions (land grants).”\textsuperscript{56}

This proved to be the final end of the idea of settling maroons as small farmers in Guiana. On the French side, racist rhetoric escalated. For the first time, terms such as “serpent” and “poisonous” were used to describe the Boni and they were accused of practicing cannibalism and incest.\textsuperscript{57} For their part, the Boni made no move to contact the French again.

\textsuperscript{53} “en général, justes et raisonables.” “Note soumise au ministre sur des lettres de Fitz-Maurice et Lescallier des 1er et 12 décembre 1786,” C\textsuperscript{14}/61/110, CAOM.


\textsuperscript{55} “Note soumise au ministre sur des lettres de Fitz-Maurice et Lescallier des 1er et 12 décembre 1786,” C\textsuperscript{14}/61/110, CAOM.

\textsuperscript{56} “des nègres comme eux ne sont pas faits pour avoir des concessions.” “Note soumise au ministre sur des lettres de Fitz-Maurice et Lescallier des 1er et 12 décembre 1786,” CAOM.

\textsuperscript{57} “Décisions demandées pour l’administration de la colonie’ notes sur la Guyane, par Lescallier, avec les réponses d’Alais,” C\textsuperscript{14}/63/269-272, CAOM.
Historians of race have argued that the colonies were crucial in the formation of French ideas of race and especially in the emerging of biological racism. Guiana, too, played a role in hardening ideas of race and racial exclusion in the late eighteenth-century. However, its unique circumstances – its poverty and isolation, its unresolved role in the French empire, its proximity to the maroons of Suriname – opened up a space and opportunity for alternate views and for experimentation with forms of colonization different from the Antilles. Twice, administrators tentatively approved a large settlement of small farmers reminiscent of Kourou, but peopled by maroons. Twice, universalist ideas seemed poised to eclipse racialist ones. Study of the evolution of late eighteenth-century French racial thought and colonial policy is incomplete without acknowledgement of the possibilities present at one time or another in Guiana.